



“Just another day in retail”: Understanding and addressing workplace sexual harassment in the Australian retail industry

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ANROWS acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land across Australia on which we work and live. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders past and present, and we value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and knowledge. We are committed to standing and working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, honouring the truths set out in the [Warawarni-gu Guma Statement](#).

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“Just another day in retail”: Understanding and addressing workplace sexual harassment in the Australian retail industry

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ANROWS research contributes to the vision of the *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032*: ending violence in one generation. This research addresses the Prevention domain – stopping violence before it starts, and the Response domain – efforts to address existing violence.

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ANROWS acknowledges the lives and experiences of the women and children affected by domestic, family and sexual violence who are represented in this report. We recognise the individual stories of courage, hope and resilience that form the basis of ANROWS research.

Caution: Some people may find parts of this content confronting or distressing. Recommended support services include 1800RESPECT (1800 737 732), Lifeline (13 11 14) and, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, 13YARN (13 92 76).

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Acronyms

CALD Culturally and linguistically diverse

LGBTQI+ Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and gender diverse, queer and questioning, and intersex; the + symbol indicates the broader inclusion of affiliated communities and identities

Glossary

Retail industry The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) defines the retail industry according to the Australian and New Zealand Standard Industrial Classification (ANZSIC), which is “units mainly engaged in the purchase and/or onselling, the commission-based buying, and the commission-based selling of goods, without significant transformation, to the general public. The Retail Trade Division also includes units that purchase and onsell goods to the general public using non-traditional means, including the internet. Units are classified to the Retail Trade Division in the first instance if they buy finished goods and then onsell them (including on a commission basis) to the general public” (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2013).

Customer sovereignty As a phenomenon, customer sovereignty denotes the special symbolic and functional influence that the customer has in the service relationship due to their financial power (Good & Cooper, 2016; Korczynski & Ott, 2004). This is depicted by the common service-sector work assumption that “the customer is always right” (Korczynski & Evans, 2013; Korczynski & Ott, 2004).

Insecure work Insecure work is non-standard or atypical employment that is associated with a lack of employment security and regularity in work scheduling, and lower statutory rights than are afforded to those in permanent employment (Rodgers & Rodgers, 1989).

Target/targets In this report, we use the term “target” or “targets” to describe individuals or groups who have experienced sexual harassment. This word was employed in the study because while the term “victim-survivor”, which is typically used in studies of sexual violence, may have been appropriate to describe the position of some retail workers in some instances of sexual harassment identified in this study, in other cases, such as being the recipient of sexist comments or jokes, it did not seem to capture the nature of the experience. “Target” can be more easily applied to the “receiver” of this behaviour across the spectrum of behaviours and experiences retail workers described to us.

Executive summary

Sexual harassment is a systemic and pervasive feature of the retail industry ecosystem and a persistent part of daily interactions between retail workers, and their managers, peers and customers. It is such a common experience that many retail workers perceive it as “just part of the job”. Sexual harassment causes harm on multiple levels: it affects the wellbeing of individual employees, damages team cohesion, creates economic damage for businesses, and is a drag on the national economy. At June 2023, the retail industry had contributed over \$102 million to Australia’s annual gross domestic product (Australian Small Business and Family Enterprise Ombudsman, 2023). It employs 9 per cent of all Australians, and is the nation’s third-largest employer of women and the second-largest employer of young people (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2021a, 2022b, 2022e). Not only is retail a major source of employment, but it is also an essential service, providing Australians with the goods they depend upon every day. Retail workers deserve safety, dignity and respect. Addressing sexual harassment in the retail industry is both a pressing workplace safety issue and a nationally significant concern. The changed legislative landscape, including the introduction of an additional “positive duty” on employers to eliminate sexual harassment and related unlawful conduct as far as possible, should add extra impetus and urgency for change.

Aims

Despite the size and significance of the retail industry, few studies have examined how the retail industry ecosystem shapes the experience of sexual harassment in the sector. This research aims to understand:

- 1) the prevalence of sexual harassment in the retail industry
- 2) the nature of sexual harassment in the retail industry
- 3) whether retail workers’ experiences of sexual harassment vary by social identity, employment contracts or job contexts
- 4) whether current industry policies and practices around the prevention, reporting and management of sexual harassment are adequate
- 5) how retail stakeholders can improve the prevention, reporting and management of sexual harassment in retail workplaces.

Methods

This project, conducted in three phases of research from 2022–2023, applies a mixed method approach, including analysis of four large data sets – two publicly available aggregate datasets from the Australian Human Rights Commission (Australian Human Rights Commission [AHRC], 2019, 2022) and two individual-level disaggregated datasets (the Designing Gender Equality into the Future of Work 2021 dataset and the Australian Women’s Working Futures 2018 dataset) – as well as interviews with key informants in the retail industry and focus groups with retail employees and supervisors.

Findings and recommendations

This study reveals that sexual harassment is a persistent and pervasive feature of retail work, arising from a complex interplay of institutional, industry-wide and organisational factors. Institutional frameworks, including employment laws, set the context for retail operations and workforce experiences. These arrangements are further influenced by industry dynamics, such as types of prevailing customer interactions and norms that reinforce the “customer is always right” mantra. Organisational policies and practices also play a crucial role in shaping workers’ experiences of sexual harassment, both positively and negatively. Within this complex ecosystem, retail workers – a diverse group with varying demographic characteristics and social identities, employment contracts and job roles – encounter sexual harassment as a routine and predictable facet of their daily work.

The insights in this report provide a detailed understanding of the drivers of workplace sexual harassment in the retail industry, offering a foundation for industry-wide change, with 10 key findings and actionable suggestions for retail stakeholders.

Finding 1: Retail is a very high-risk industry for sexual harassment and the experience of sexual harassment is pervasive across retail workplaces

The experience of sexual harassment is so pervasive in retail workplaces, it is seen by workers as a routine and unavoidable aspect of daily work. To address this systemic issue, this report recommends reframing sexual harassment as a very common and sector-wide phenomenon and calls for the development of industry-level solutions to prevent and manage these behaviours. Ideas for stakeholder action include:

- establishing a Retail Industry Workplace Respect Committee to bring senior industry leaders (from retail employers and the retail union to representatives of organisations with expertise in prevention of gendered violence) to collaborate on industry-wide strategies to prevent and address sexual harassment in retail
- developing an industry-wide strategy focused on the prevention and management of sexual harassment, including a harmonised approach to policy design, data collection, training, reporting and customer-perpetrated harassment.

Finding 2: The risk of experiencing sexual harassment is heightened for particular groups of retail workers

Retail workers experience sexual harassment at higher rates than workers in most other industries, but some workers face even greater risk. Women workers, young workers, workers living with disability and gay men experience sexual harassment more frequently, suggesting the need for differentiated approaches to the prevention and management of sexual harassment. Ideas for joint employer, employer association and union action include:

- ensuring that data collection on sexual harassment incidence (ethically and appropriately administered and stored) includes the demographic characteristics of sexual harassment targets, to enable greater precision and risk-based assessment in the design of interventions, policies and practices
- developing targeted strategies to address specific workforce group needs, including tailored awareness campaigns, reporting channels and support, and collaborating with high-risk workforce members to co-design relevant and accessible interventions.

Finding 3: Retail workers experience sexual harassment perpetrated by managers, peers and customers

Retail workers experience sexual harassment perpetrated by managers, peers and customers – but the patterns of harassment are gendered. Women are more likely to experience harassment from customers, while men report higher instances of harassment from managers. Organisational and industry-wide interventions, policies and practices aimed at preventing and managing sexual harassment must recognise that although women experience sexual harassment at greater rates than men, the problem is experienced by all genders. Ideas for joint stakeholder action by employers, the employer association and the union include:

- conducting routine and detailed data collection (ethically and appropriately administered and stored) to better understand the employee experience of workplace sexual harassment, common perpetrator profiles, and points and moments of greatest risk, and tailoring prevention and response strategies to reflect the “origin” of the experience (e.g. peers, managers or customers)
- sharing deidentified data-driven information across the sector to develop a comprehensive and evolving industry-wide understanding of the employee experience of workplace sexual harassment, common perpetrator profiles and points of greatest risk.

Finding 4: Customer-perpetrated sexual harassment is a significant problem and is perpetuated and enabled by prevailing industry norms

Customer-perpetrated sexual harassment is a defining feature of retail work, enabled by industry-wide norms that prioritise customer sovereignty and reward employee deference. Customer-perpetrated harassment often takes subtle, hard-to-confront forms such as leering, staring, hovering or inappropriate (but not overtly sexual) comments, making it challenging for workers to confront or report. Ideas for joint stakeholder action by employers, the employer association, and the union include:

- collaborating on an industry-wide customer education campaign to address inappropriate customer behaviours
- providing clear training and organisational communications to frontline workers and managers challenging the notion that the customer is “always right”, and empowering retail workers to confront inappropriate customer behaviours
- enhancing worker safety through measures like CCTV cameras, duress alarms, code words for discreet help requests, and ensuring sufficient staffing levels and security personnel, especially during high-risk periods such as store closing.

Finding 5: Organisational policy on how to deal with sexual harassment is inconsistent and information is not easy to access or understand

Across the retail industry, organisational policies on sexual harassment lack consistency. While some employers have clear policies and procedures for reporting and addressing incidences of sexual harassment, others have less clearly delineated processes. Consequently, many retail workers find it difficult to locate, access and understand organisational policies and processes pertaining to sexual harassment and frequently resort to searching the internet for general advice. This lack of uniformity creates confusion for employees seeking redress. Ideas for joint stakeholder action by employers, the employer association and the union include:

- establishing clear, industry-wide guidelines encompassing definitions, scope, reporting procedures, and consequences for sexual harassment perpetrators, and assigning unambiguous ownership of the sexual harassment policy area within organisations to ensure a consistent approach
- ensuring that all retail employees have easy access to clear and consistent information about sexual harassment policies and procedures, tailored to the known vulnerabilities and risk profiles of specific demographic groups.

Finding 6: Organisational and industry-wide training of workers and managers on sexual harassment is inconsistent, infrequent and poorly targeted

Training offers retail employers the capacity to equip workers and managers with the knowledge and skills needed to prevent and address sexual harassment. However, across the retail industry, there is significant variation in the quality, quantity, frequency and types of sexual harassment training provided. A small minority of organisations offer comprehensive and regular sexual harassment training, reinforced by regular manager-to-employee conversations. Most training is delivered online, as a one-off module upon initial employment, and there is little evidence of bystander training. Ideas for stakeholder action include:

- tailoring employer- and union-delivered training content to suit the unique characteristics of workplaces, job roles and workforce composition
- providing employer- and union-delivered training sessions at regular intervals utilising both online and in-person methods to reinforce learning and ensure that employees stay informed and engaged
- linking employer-provided training to regular team conversations initiated by supervisors and managers to foster ongoing awareness and discussion about preventing sexual harassment
- ensuring that all employer- and union-delivered training content and delivery is appropriately trauma-informed to reflect leading practice.

Finding 7: Sexual harassment data collection and analysis is non-standardised, limited and ad hoc and this limits insights in relation to incidence

There is a notable lack of robust and standardised data collection on the nature and frequency of workplace sexual harassment across the industry. Most data are currently derived from formal complaints or anonymous surveys, likely underestimating the true extent of the issue. The absence of consistent data collection hinders the identification and understanding of the actual prevalence of sexual harassment, making it challenging to allocate resources effectively. Ideas for joint stakeholder action by employers, the employer association and the union include:

- adopting a standardised industry-wide approach to data collection, including conducting regular sector-wide surveys to understand the nature and frequency of sexual harassment
- developing informal and real-time reporting pathways that are easily accessible to employees, possibly through apps, and using data collection methods as a consultative tool, rather than a compliance measure.

Finding 8: Complaints and reporting processes are opaque and not trusted by workers, limiting workers' willingness to raise and report experiences of sexual harassment

Many retail workers find the sexual harassment complaint and reporting processes in their organisations to be unclear, confusing and, at worst, untrustworthy. There is significant variation in reporting mechanisms and processes across organisations, leading to a lack of clarity and protection for employees, causing many to feel unsure and unsafe when deciding whether to report sexual harassment to their managers and supervisors. Ideas for joint stakeholder action by employers, the employer association and the union include:

- establishing accessible, confidential, clear and trauma-informed reporting mechanisms for incidents of sexual harassment
- setting and communicating clear protocols to ensure confidentiality and support for complainants and witnesses and providing employees with explicit protections against retaliation or adverse consequences from raising a report or complaint
- improving transparency by providing complainants with clear guidance about how their reports will be managed and their confidentiality safeguarded, and by clearly communicating the outcomes of investigations and actions taken to address sexual harassment.

Finding 9: Human resources managers and work health and safety managers are the key "owners" of organisational policies and practices, but they lack the resources they need to adequately address sexual harassment, limiting meaningful action

Specialist managers, such as human resources and work health and safety managers, play a crucial role in preventing and addressing sexual harassment, and many expressed deep concerns for worker safety. However, many specialist managers lack the necessary data and organisational resources needed to effectively manage the problem. There is also a notable gap between frontline retail workers' understanding of sexual harassment, and specialist managers' perceptions of worker knowledge. This suggests a need for greater focus on developing tools that empower workers to address harassment from customers directly, rather than seeking to raise worker awareness of what sexual harassment is. Other ideas for action, primarily focused on retail employers, include:

- fostering industry-wide collaboration among specialist managers, possibly auspiced by the Retail Industry Respect Committee
- providing specialist managers with improved resources and support, ensuring that senior leaders consult with these crucial managers to address shortcomings in organisational systems and processes.

Finding 10: Supervisors and store managers are the “frontline” in dealing with sexual harassment and they need better support to do this work well

Retail supervisors play a pivotal role in preventing, managing and addressing sexual harassment and their leadership greatly impacts the working environment for retail employees. While their actions are highly valued by workers, supervisors often lack recognition, support and resources to effectively address sexual harassment, and are also frequently targets of harassment themselves. Ideas for employer, employer association and union action include:

- recognising that line managers play a critical role in supporting employees who are targets of harassment and should be equipped with appropriate training and resources to respond effectively
- developing targeted supervisor training to build supervisor capacity in relation to policy, reporting processes, support for team members and their team members’ legal rights and responsibilities
- establishing policies to foster and encourage supervisor-led discussions of sexual harassment within retail teams, to normalise conversations about this very significant risk and to encourage employees to seek help when they need it.

Conclusion

This research underscores that sexual harassment is a systemic issue, influenced by a complex interplay of institutional, industry-level and organisational factors that compound to place retail workers at a relatively high risk of workplace sexual harassment. The findings outlined in this report call for industry-wide collaboration; the development of comprehensive systems, policies and practices; harmonised data collection; and efforts to disrupt the normalisation of harassment in daily retail interactions. This research also highlights the need for further inquiry and industry collaboration focused on the effectiveness of interventions, experiences of high-risk workforce cohorts and the dynamics of the retail ecosystem, to inform evidence-based policy and practice for addressing workplace sexual harassment in the Australian retail industry.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Sexual harassment is a pervasive, persistent and pernicious problem in workplaces across the globe. Despite legislative and policy efforts to address the problem, workers across regions, occupations and industries continue to endure this harmful behaviour at work. Workers in the retail industry are particularly at risk of this damaging experience. In this industry the material context and prevailing social norms shape sexual harassment, including the young age and cultural diversity of the workforce, precarious working conditions and industry norms which privilege customer service and construct a power differential between workers and customers. Despite the prevalence and risk of sexual harassment in the retail industry and the importance of this industry as a major employer in Australia and globally, there is a scarcity of research on the experiences of retail workers in relation to sexual harassment and next to no analysis of retail employers' and managers' experiences, practices and policies in this area.

This report presents the results of research conducted to understand how employees and managers in the Australian retail industry understand, experience and manage sexual harassment at work. This research aims to understand: 1) the prevalence of sexual harassment in the retail industry; 2) the nature of sexual harassment in the retail industry; 3) whether retail workers' experiences of sexual harassment vary by social identity, employment contracts or job contexts; 4) whether current industry policies and practices around the prevention, reporting and management of sexual harassment are adequate; and 5) how retail stakeholders can improve the prevention, reporting and management of sexual harassment in retail workplaces.

As such, we constructed the following questions:

- 1) What is the prevalence and nature of sexual harassment in the retail industry?
- 2) What is the nature of sexual harassment experienced in the retail industry?
- 3) How do retail workers' experiences of sexual harassment vary by social identity, employment contracts or job contexts?
- 4) How adequate are current practices and policies for preventing, accurately reporting and addressing sexual harassment in the retail industry?
- 5) How can retail stakeholders improve the prevention, reporting and management of sexual harassment in retail workplaces?

The Australian retail industry

The retail industry is the third-largest employing industry in Australia (ABS, 2022e), comprising about 9 per cent of the country's workforce (ABS, 2022d). Over half (56%) of retail employees are women, making it the third-most feminised industry in the country after health care and social assistance, and education and training (ABS, 2022b). Women's role in driving business success and profitability is crucial, as they influence around 75 per cent of consumer spending decisions (Australian Retailers Association [ARA], 2023). However, there is significant evidence of entrenched gender inequality in the industry. The average weekly ordinary time earnings for full-time adults in retail in 2022 was \$1,431 for men and \$1,264 for women, representing a gender pay gap of nearly 12 per cent (ABS, 2023). While women make up 56 per cent of the retail workforce, the proportion of women in management positions is lower, at 49 per cent, and women are relatively more likely to take on lower-level management roles as supervisors and team leaders than more senior positions (Lind & Colquhoun, 2021; WGEA, 2022a). Women are underrepresented in senior leadership positions, holding only 27 per cent of board positions and 17 per cent of chief executive officer roles in the industry (WGEA, 2022b).

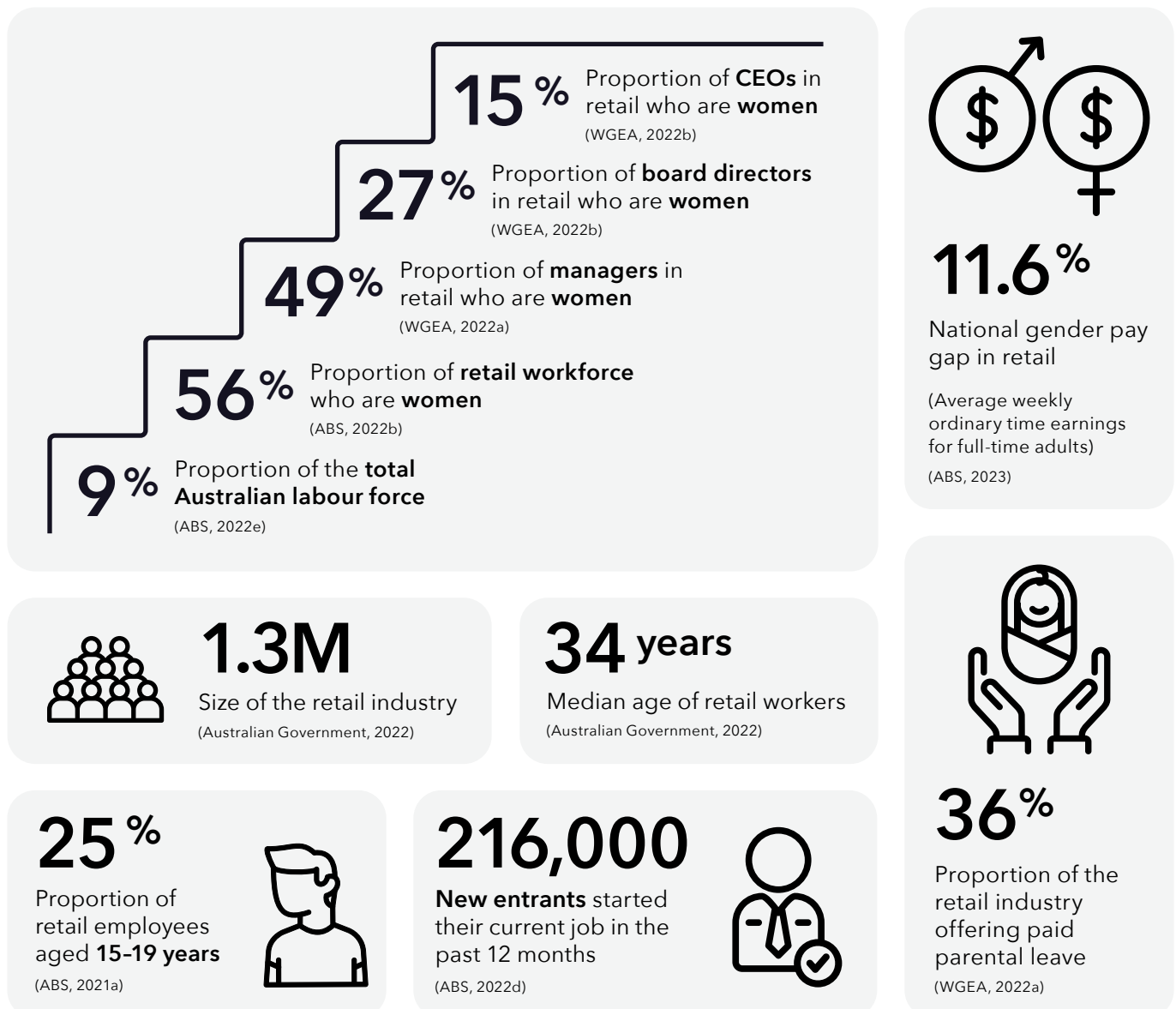
The Australian retail workforce

The retail industry has a young and culturally diverse workforce (ABS, 2022d; AHRC, 2019). The average age of retail workers is considerably lower than that of the overall working population: retail workers have a median age of 34 years, compared to 44 years for all Australian workers (AHRC, 2019; Australian Government, 2022). The industry is a key employer of young people: 25 per cent of the workforce are workers aged 15 to 19 years, making it the second-largest employer of this age cohort, just behind accommodation and food services (ABS, 2021a). The industry also employs the largest proportion of workers of any sector aged 20 to 24 years, with 17 per cent of this age cohort in retail (ABS, 2021a).

Retail work in Australia

Retail work is associated with lower pay and higher levels of employment insecurity than work in most other industries in Australia (ABS, 2022a, 2022c). Half of the retail workforce is employed on less than full-time hours, with 33 per cent of total employees engaged on a casual basis (ABS, 2021b). Retail employees work irregular shifts and have unpredictable schedules, with only 40 per cent of workers reporting they work the same shifts each week (Cortis et al., 2021). This has significant impacts for the scheduling of care and other life demands (Cortis et al., 2021). Just over a third (37%) of employers in the retail industry provide paid parental leave above the mandated national standard (WGEA, 2022a). These features of the retail industry workforce are summarised in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Key indicators for the retail industry



Approach and theoretical model

Figure 2 sets out how we have conceptualised the environment within which sexual harassment occurs in retail workplaces and the ways in which different groups of retail employees are vulnerable to sexual harassment at work. This approach has informed the design of each of the research phases and shapes our analysis of the research data. The model draws on, and modifies, Cooper et al.'s (2021) approach in a study designed to understand the forces producing gendered dynamics in careers in the context of investment management. Cooper et al. (2021) argue that ecosystems that are “comprised of industry-specific structures, actors, and interactions” (p. 1916) are critical in explaining worker experiences in particular contexts. This ecosystem approach is extremely useful for uncovering and understanding how complex forces at three different levels or scales – institutions, industry and organisation – shape behaviours in the workplace.

1) Institution

This approach begins with a focus on the institutional level, which may include the regulatory context for sexual harassment such as how sexual harassment is framed in national legislation; what behaviours are identified; which parties are included; and what actions are encouraged by different stakeholders, such as complainants or employers, by the law.

2) Industry

Forces operating at the industry level also exert an influence on behaviours in the workplace. These might include the operation of industry-wide policies and practices and, importantly, include the pervasive social norms that underpin employment practices in a specific industry or sector.

3) Organisation

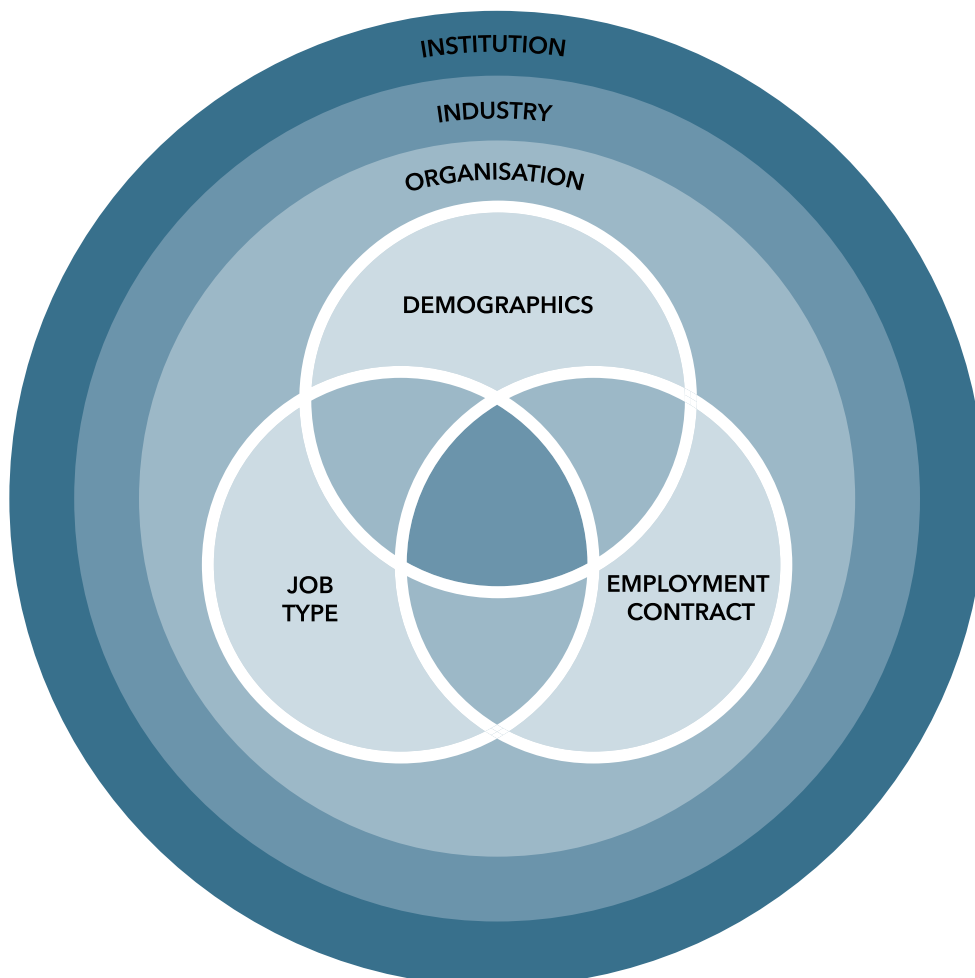
Distinct approaches, policies and practices at the organisation level can also influence the experience of sexual harassment. These might include the existence and the nature of specific employers' policies, the organisational approach to incident reporting, or training employees and supervisors on recognising and dealing with sexual harassment.

An intersectional lens

In this study we have applied an intersectional lens to understand the experience of sexual harassment in retail and how the specific characteristics of retail workers and retail jobs shape experiences of sexual harassment. This intersectional frame for understanding experiences and vulnerabilities in retail has three elements which include and also extend beyond individual identities of subjects. First, we have sought to understand the ways in which the job type shapes the experience of sexual harassment. This includes understanding how the “frontline” nature of many retail employees’ jobs impacts experience, how the experience of supervisors may be different from that of team members, and how jobs in different contexts,

for example selling different products, may impact the experience of sexual harassment. Second, we attempt to understand how people in different demographic and identity groups – specifically across genders, sexualities and cultural identities – experience sexual harassment in unique ways. Third, we build an understanding of how workers on different employment contracts, for example casual workers compared to permanent employees, might experience sexual harassment in different ways and with different meanings and consequences for their work. Each of these elements of the intersectional frame is woven together in this analysis of the retail industry ecosystem for sexual harassment.

Figure 2: Industry ecosystem for sexual harassment



Legislative context

Laws prohibiting sexual harassment have operated at the federal and state/territory levels for over three decades in Australia. The primary legislative framework that regulates workplace sexual harassment at the federal level is the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* (Cth). Under the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* (Cth), sexual harassment is defined as “an unwelcome sexual advance, or an unwelcome request for sexual favours” or “unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature” where a reasonable person would have anticipated the possibility that the person harassed “would be offended, humiliated or intimidated”. State and territory anti-discrimination laws also prohibit sexual harassment. Appendix B summarises the relevant state-based legislation.

There have been several waves of amendments to the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* (Cth) during the past two decades. Two changes that are especially pertinent for the retail workforce and industry are, first, the enhanced legal protection from customer-perpetrated sexual harassment, and later the positive duty for employers introduced in the *Sex and Age Discrimination Legislation Amendment Act 2011* (Cth) and the *Anti-Discrimination and Human Rights Legislation Amendment (Respect at Work) Act 2022* (Cth). These changes are outlined in brief.

In 2011, the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* (Cth) was amended to provide workers with legal protection from customer-perpetrated sexual harassment. This was partly in response to a 2008 Senate inquiry examining the efficacy of the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* (Cth) in preventing discrimination (Senate Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs, 2008), which found limited protections for workers who experienced harassment from “third parties” at work, including customers. The *Sex and Age Discrimination Legislation Amendment Act 2011* (Cth) made it unlawful to “sexually harass another person in the course of seeking, or receiving, goods, services or facilities from that other

person”, which ensured further coverage of sexual harassment by third parties engaging with employees/workers, and extended coverage from just the “workplace” to connection with work activities (see ss 28B(3) to (7) of the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984*).

In 2022, the federal parliament passed the *Anti-Discrimination and Human Rights Legislation Amendment (Respect at Work) Act 2022* (Cth), which amended the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* (Cth). This answered decades of advocacy for a preventative rather than reactive approach to sexual harassment. This theme was highlighted with publication of the Australian Human Rights Commission’s (AHRC) *Respect@Work: National Inquiry into Sexual Harassment in Australian Workplaces* report (AHRC, 2020). This inquiry found employers often took “reactive, compliance-driven” approaches to address sexual harassment following a formal complaint and did not adequately address the cultural or systemic practices and issues underlying workplace sexual harassment (AHRC, 2020, p. 620). Critically, reflecting a government and community concern that progress was too slow, the 2022 amendments introduced a positive duty on employers and persons conducting a business or undertaking, requiring them to take “reasonable and proportionate measures to eliminate, as far as possible, certain discriminatory conduct”.¹ This includes “discrimination on the ground of a person’s sex, sexual harassment, harassment on the ground of sex, creating a hostile work environment, and acts of victimisation that relate to complaints, proceedings, assertions or allegations in relation to such conduct”. This duty extends to behaviour perpetrated toward employers, and by third parties such as customers, clients or suppliers. The amendments introduced new powers for the AHRC to monitor and assess compliance with the legislation, commencing December 2023.

¹ The Victorian state government was the first state in Australia to introduce a positive duty to prevent sex discrimination under the *Equal Opportunity Act 2010* (Vic).

Sexual harassment is also regulated under legislation that governs the relationship between employers and employees in the industrial and safety jurisdictions including under the *Fair Work Regulations 2009* (Cth) and *Work Health and Safety Act 2011* (Cth). In tandem with changes in the discrimination arena, there have been amendments to these legislations.

The *Fair Work Act 2009* (Cth) and *Fair Work Regulations 2009* (Cth) established the Fair Work system, which regulates the employer–employee relationship in Australia. Initially, the Fair Work Act did not explicitly outlaw sexual harassment. However, it could be, although rarely was, challenged under broader provisions such as “adverse action” concerning workplace rights or based on sex and associated characteristics. Various stakeholders, including legal, union, business and non-government organisations, advocated for the explicit inclusion of a sexual harassment prohibition in the *Fair Work Act 2009* (Cth) to enhance the protections within the industrial relations system. As a result, the *Fair Work Act 2009* (Cth) was amended via the *Fair Work Legislation Amendment (Secure Jobs, Better Pay) Act 2022* (Cth) to specifically prohibit workplace sexual harassment. On 6 March 2023, under the *Fair Work Act 2009* (Cth) it became “unlawful for a person to sexually harass another person” in connection with their work. Workers now are hence protected from workplace sexual harassment and a person or organisation may be liable for sexual harassment perpetrated by an employee or agent in connection with work, unless the employer can demonstrate they took reasonable steps to prevent the behaviour occurring.

The *Work Health and Safety Act 2011* (Cth) stipulates employers have a primary duty of care to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health and safety of their employees, including ensuring their physical and psychological safety. Work health and safety laws in Australia are legislated and regulated under both state/territory and federal jurisdictions. They are largely standardised through uniform model Work Health and Safety laws, comprising the model WHS Act, the model WHS Regulations and the model WHS Codes of Practice. These are adopted in all states except Victoria where similar duties and responsibilities are legislated under the *Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004* (Vic). Under the *Model Work Health and Safety Act* employers are required

to eliminate or minimise risks to the health and safety of workers and others, including sexual harassment, as far as reasonably practical. On 20 May 2021, ministers responsible for work health and safety voted and agreed on proposed amendments to the *Model Work Health and Safety Regulations* to insert new provisions on the management of psychosocial risks in the workplace. These amendments were progressed by Safe Work Australia. At the time of writing this report, the majority of jurisdictions had implemented these amendments in their respective regulations. In October 2022, New South Wales was the first jurisdiction to implement these changes in its *Work Health and Safety Regulation 2017* (NSW). In August 2022 Safe Work Australia also released a *Model Work Health and Safety Code of Practice* on managing psychosocial hazards at work. These reforms have clarified the application of work health and safety laws to sexual harassment as a work health and safety risk, including the duty to eliminate or minimise the risk of sexual harassment as far as reasonably practicable.

The legislation outlined above forms part of the context for sexual harassment in Australian retail workplaces.

Report structure

This report is structured into eight chapters. Chapter 2 reviews the extant research on how retail workers and managers experience sexual harassment. Chapter 3 outlines the mixed method approach underpinning this research. Chapter 4 leverages and analyses four pre-existing datasets to provide statistical analysis of the phenomenon of sexual harassment in the retail industry. Chapter 5 presents the analysis of key informant interviews with leaders in the industry, revealing insights into existing practices and strategies used to prevent and address workplace sexual harassment. Chapter 6 presents findings on the understanding and experiences of sexual harassment among retail employees and managers. Chapter 7 focuses on how workers and managers perceive and understand organisational mechanisms for dealing with sexual harassment. Chapter 8 presents a discussion of the overall findings of the research in thematic structure; makes suggestions for changes in approach, policy and practice; and concludes the report.

CHAPTER 2

Literature review

Introduction

Scholarly and policy interest on the phenomenon of sexual harassment in workplaces has increased rapidly in the past decade, and includes research focused on different countries and industries and using distinct methodologies. However, despite the size and importance of the retail industry, there have been surprisingly few studies examining sexual harassment in retail or the experiences of retail workers. In conducting this literature review, we identified only 11 empirical studies that specifically address the dynamics of sexual harassment in the retail context. This chapter explores and synthesises the extant research about workers' experiences of sexual harassment in retail. Because of the paucity of research into this specific industry, it also draws insight from studies of sexual harassment more broadly.

The chapter has six sections. The first section describes our methodology and approach in conducting the literature review. The second section summarises how sexual harassment is defined and understood in the extant research. The third section investigates the impact of sexual harassment on individual workers, teams, organisations and the economy more broadly. The fourth section explores workplace dynamics in retail that make it a high-risk environment for sexual harassment. The fifth section highlights the demographic groups that are identified as being most vulnerable to sexual harassment and the specific experiences of sexual harassment for these groups. Finally, the sixth section investigates effective approaches to prevent and address sexual harassment, as well as current responses to sexual harassment in retail.

Methodology and approach

A narrative review of the extant research provides a strong understanding of worker experiences and perceptions of sexual harassment in retail. We included the search terms “sexual harassment” and “retail” in four databases: EBSCO (Business Source Ultimate; Sociology Source Ultimate), ProQuest Central, Web of Science and SAGE. As the initial search revealed a limited number of studies pertaining to sexual harassment in the retail industry, to capture the widest breadth of available research, no date range or specific context was applied. Only peer reviewed articles were included in the review. The total number of results was 89. We then manually filtered to exclude duplicates and papers deemed to be outside the scope of interest (i.e. sexual harassment in retail workplaces), producing a total of 11 relevant papers (see Appendix C).

Of the 11 studies identified, only four specifically examined the experiences of sexual harassment in the retail industry. One of these explored the nature and extent of workplace sexual harassment among women in fashion retailing in the United States (Workman, 1993). This study was replicated in another study conducted 10 years later using the same survey instrument and a similar demographic group (Leslie & Hauck, 2005). A third study examined the nature, prevalence and consequences of customer-perpetrated sexual harassment among women retail workers and security guards in Canada (Hughes & Tadic, 1998). Finally, an Australian study explored the perspectives on customer-perpetrated sexual harassment among retail managers/employers and lawyers (Walker et al., 2019).

Another five studies in the final group of 11 did not exclusively focus on retail workers but included samples of both retail and other service sector workers as part of a larger diverse sample. These included two Australian studies that examined retail and hospitality worker responses to customer-perpetrated sexual harassment (Good & Cooper, 2014, 2016); two studies undertaken in the United States, including a two-part survey study of professional service workers and retail supermarket workers (Gettman & Gelfand, 2007); a United States study that included qualitative research among young workers predominantly employed in retail, food service and arts and entertainment (Brown et al., 2020); and a qualitative study (Handy, 2006) that investigated women's experiences of sexual harassment across three industries in New Zealand – meatworks, retail and banking.

The remaining two studies, both from the United States, explored the experiences of workplace incivilities more broadly, including sexual harassment: a mixed method study examined the experiences of workplace violence among young retail workers (Runyan et al., 2005), and a qualitative study examined women working in service sector jobs including retail, fast food and banking (Tindell & Padavic, 2022).

Combined, these studies provide a grounding in and overview of themes pertaining to sexual harassment in the retail industry. However, due to the limited volume of research in this area, further scholarly inquiry is clearly warranted.

The following sections present an overview of research on sexual harassment organised around five themes: defining sexual harassment; the impact of sexual harassment (on individuals, teams and the economy); workplace norms that shape the experience of sexual harassment, such as gender inequality, customer sovereignty and insecure work; workers who experience sexual harassment; and existing strategies to prevent and address workplace sexual harassment. The section for each theme presents an overview of research which focuses on a breadth of industries and, where studies exist, we narrow the focus to research that is particular to retail workplaces and the experiences of retail workers.

Defining sexual harassment

Existing studies recognise a variety of behaviours as sexual harassment. Importantly, scholars argue that sexual harassment is not primarily driven by sexual desire but rather by the harassers' motivation to uphold or enhance their own status based on sex within organisational and occupational contexts (Acker, 2006; McLaughlin et al., 2012; Schultz, 1998; Uggen & Blackstone, 2004). Moreover, they contend that sexual harassment is behaviour that is tacitly supported and endorsed within a cultural framework where social status is deeply and extensively stratified by sex and gender.

There is also related literature on "gender harassment" that identifies a variety of additional behaviours, including but not limited to making crude or offensive remarks or jokes; engaging in demeaning comments or banter about individuals of a particular gender or discrediting remarks about an entire gender; questioning competence based on gender, adherence to gender roles or caregiver status; making hostile comments implying that individuals of a specific gender do not belong; and using non-sexual threats or intimidation (Buchanan et al., 2018; Foley et al., 2022; Leskinen et al., 2011; Leskinen & Cortina, 2014; Parker & Griffin, 2002; Welsh, 2000).

In this report we use behaviours framed as "sexual harassment" or "gender harassment" identified in the literature, and summarised by Foley et al. (2022), to set the boundaries of our broad-based understanding of sexual harassment in the retail sector (see Table 1).

Table 1: Sex-based harassment (gender and sexual) as framed in extant research

Sexual harassment <i>Sexualised behaviours, based on sex or gender</i>	Gender harassment <i>Non-sexualised behaviours, based on sex or gender</i>
Sexual remarks or display of sexual materials	Crude or offensive remarks; jokes
Sexual attention, unwelcome advances or attempts to seduce	Sexist or demeaning comments
Sexual bribery, approaches linked to rewards	Discrediting remarks (individual or category-based)
Sexual coercion, advances with threat of punishment	Scrutinising, criticising
Sexual impositions	Refusing compliance
Sexual assault	Sabotage
	Threatening or intimidating acts

Source: Foley et al. (2022, p. 1679).

Impact of workplace sexual harassment

Workplace sexual harassment impacts individual workers who experience it, their co-workers, the organisations where harassment occurs, and the economy more broadly.

Impact on targets of sexual harassment

Wellbeing and mental health

Academic research shows that workplace sexual harassment has negative psychological and physical consequences for workers who are targets, including embarrassment or anger; poor mental health outcomes such as anxiety, depression and in some cases post-traumatic stress disorder; and negative impacts on physical health (Avina & O'Donohue, 2002; Barling et al., 2001; Fitzgerald et al., 1999; McDonald, 2012; Willness et al., 2007). These effects can be long-standing, with one study concluding that sexual harassment experienced early in a woman's career could have long-lasting impact and was linked to increased depressive symptoms in the following 10 years (Houle et al., 2011).

In retail: The impact of sexual harassment on retail workers as a specific cohort is understudied, however the few studies that have investigated the retail industry find

similar impacts as those identified in the general research above. The retail-specific literature shows that sexual harassment impacts targets' physical and mental health in a wide variety of ways, including personal embarrassment, anger, worry, fear, illness, depression, anxiety and feelings of worthlessness (Brown et al., 2020; Good & Cooper, 2016; Hughes & Tadic, 1998; Leslie & Hauck, 2005). One qualitative study among 31 young retail workers in the United States found that sexual harassment had negative impacts on academic performance at school and university, and in some cases those who experienced it were engaging in maladaptive coping strategies (Brown et al., 2020).

Career progression and earnings

The general research on workplace sexual harassment documents both the immediate and long-term impacts on targets' employment outcomes, including career progression and earnings. For example, sexual harassment can have both tangible and intangible effects on targets including reduced job satisfaction; decreased commitment to work; and career withdrawal evidenced by task avoidance and/or neglect, lateness and absenteeism (Chan et al., 2008; Lapierre et al., 2005; Merkin, 2008; Willness et

al., 2007). Workplace sexual harassment may also compel a target to change jobs, leading to longer-term career disruption and wage “scarring” (Folke & Rickne, 2022; McLaughlin et al., 2017).

In retail: The retail-specific research, while limited, shows that sexual harassment has similar impacts on targets’ career progression, job satisfaction and job performance. For example, retail industry researchers identify sexual harassment has several negative consequences for targets, including reduced interest in work and job performance, and a tendency to contemplate quitting their job or transferring to a new one (Gettman & Gelfand, 2007; Hughes & Tadic, 1998). However, these studies were unable to explore the various socio-economic factors that contribute to staff turnover, including the nature of the work, the importance of the job, and the influence of supportive work groups, a limitation noted by Hughes and Tadic (1998).

Impact on teams and staffing

Beyond the individual target, the research shows that the incidence of workplace sexual harassment has consequences for co-workers, whole teams and staffing more generally. Where targets withdraw from their workplaces or reduce their efforts due to sexual harassment, the workload for other team members increases. There can also be negative effects on team cohesion, functioning and processes, as well as the job satisfaction and mental and physical health of co-workers (Glomb et al., 1997; Merkin, 2008; Merkin & Shah, 2014; Raver & Gelfand, 2005). Lost and unproductive hours of work and increased staff turnover linked to workplace sexual harassment can have significant financial implications for businesses (Faley et al., 2006; Folke & Rickne, 2022; Merkin, 2008; Merkin & Shah, 2014; Willness et al., 2007).

In retail: Unfortunately, the extant studies on sexual harassment in retail do not explore the impact on wellbeing of other team members or staffing and there is a significant research gap.

Economic and financial impact

There are a range of negative financial impacts for employers from the direct and indirect costs of workplace sexual harassment. Organisations facing complaints of sexual harassment incur direct costs through legal fees, reputational damage and the negative public sentiment from legal action (see, for example, Borelli-Kjaer et al., 2021; McLaughlin et al., 2017). These financial losses not only impact organisations but can extend to the economy at large. Workplace sexual harassment has been estimated to cost the Australian economy up to \$3.5 billion annually, due to lost productivity and the cost of targets accessing health and justice systems (AHRC, 2020).

In retail: The financial impact of sexual harassment on retail businesses has rarely been the subject of academic studies. However, there is some evidence that Australian retail businesses do have financial repercussions from legal cases. In one sexual harassment and discrimination case a large national retailer incurred significant financial costs (Walker et al., 2019), demonstrating the potential for substantial payouts for workers involved in other sexual harassment lawsuits in Australia.

Workplace context

The extant research shows that workplace context, including sector and industry, can influence workers' experience of sexual harassment. This section explores how certain workforce dynamics, including gender inequality, prevailing industry norms and insecure work, may shape the incidence and prevalence of sexual harassment.

Gender inequality

Gender inequality in the workplace is often seen as a key factor underlying the incidence and prevalence of sexual harassment. Feminist scholars have long recognised sexual harassment as a gendered expression of power (Chamberlain et al., 2008; Fitzgerald & Cortina, 2018; Minnotte & Legerski, 2019). For example, in her foundational research identifying and defining the very concept of sexual harassment, MacKinnon (1979) argued that harassment was primarily an exercise of “power”, used to marginalise and exclude women from the workplace, weakening women's economic independence and reinforcing patriarchal power structures. It is well established that women are the primary targets of workplace sexual harassment, and that men are the primary perpetrators (Chamberlain et al., 2008; Fitzgerald & Cortina, 2018; Folke & Rickne, 2022; Kensbock et al., 2015; Lopez et al., 2009; McLaughlin et al., 2012, 2017; Roscigno, 2019). However, studies have also shown that sexual harassment is more frequent and acute in workplaces characterised by gendered imbalances and strong organisational hierarchies (Buchanan et al., 2018; Foley et al., 2022; Jahnke et al., 2019; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018).

In retail: There has been limited research on the role of gender inequality and organisational hierarchy in the incidence and prevalence of sexual harassment in the retail industry. However, the extant scholarship on sexual harassment in the service sector suggests that unequal power dynamics and service norms are key contributors, particularly with male customers. For example, one qualitative study of 15 hospitality and retail workers in Australia found that many participants understood

that receiving and tolerating sexualised comments from male customers was just “part of the job” (Good & Cooper, 2016), while other studies reveal a pattern of sexual harassment perpetrated by male customers and co-workers (Handy, 2006; Hughes & Tadic, 1998; Leslie & Hauck, 2005; Walker et al., 2019). While much of the extant research on sexual harassment in the service sector has focused on male customers, there has been very little research on male supervisor-perpetrated sexual harassment.

Workplace norms: Customer sovereignty, aesthetic labour and emotional labour

Workplace norms can amplify the risk of sexual harassment in service sector workplaces. Numerous studies reveal that the notion of “customer sovereignty” (Korczynski & Ott, 2004), typified by the adage that ‘the customer is always right’ (Korczynski & Evans, 2013), creates an environment in which customer-perpetrated harassment and abuse are enabled, justified or excused. Staff in these contexts can feel pressure to defer to and please customers (Yagil, 2008), while being expected to manage their own emotions along with those of their customers (Hochschild, 2012). Researchers have also argued that, in some environments, staff may even be encouraged to “flirt” with customers as a routine part of customer service, which can also allow sexual harassment to flourish (Warhurst & Nickson, 2007, 2009).

In retail: Numerous studies show that sexualised and harassing behaviour is often perceived as being a normal and acceptable feature of retail and other service-oriented work (Brown et al., 2020; Good & Cooper, 2016; Hughes & Tadic, 1998; Warhurst & Nickson, 2007). Studies of the retail sector show that customer service norms shape workers' experiences of and responses to sexual harassment. In a foundational study of sexual harassment in retail work conducted in Canada in the late 1990s, one worker noted they were expected to “grin and bear a lot” (Hughes & Tadic, 1998, p. 215), given that the customer is always “right”. Recent Australian studies on retail and hospitality workers have similarly found that

workers in retail are required to adopt a friendly and engaging persona for customers, which was sometimes misconstrued by customers as “flirting” or personal connection and that the lines between customer service and sexual harassment were difficult to delineate (Good & Cooper, 2014, 2016).

Insecure work

A key theme in research on sexual harassment is the association between job insecurity, defined as temporary, unpredictable, casual and often low-paid work (Reuter et al., 2020), and a heightened prevalence of sexual harassment. Scholars identify precarious employment as a key risk factor for sexual harassment because of the dynamics at play in highly precarious workplaces (Howe et al., 2022; LaMontagne et al., 2009; Lopez et al., 2009; Reuter et al., 2020). These include anonymity of perpetrators in insecure working arrangements and the powerlessness of targets due to contractual expendability, which can inhibit responses to sexual harassment.

In retail: Two studies have linked precarious employment with the experience of sexual harassment in retail. Handy’s (2006) qualitative study that included a sample of four retail workers in New Zealand found sexual harassment was perpetrated more by flexible contract workers than by permanent workers as they were able to “spread” their behaviour across locations (p. 20). Workers reported difficulty in responding to this behaviour and tolerated actions more readily than they would from permanent staff they worked with on a daily basis (Handy, 2006).

In the Australian context, a key study on workers in retail (and the related hospitality sector) found that workers viewed their precarious jobs as temporary, leading them to “endure” rather than complain to managers or external parties about their experience (Good & Cooper, 2016).

Groups of workers who experience sexual harassment

This section investigates what the extant research tells us about the experiences of different workforce groups, including their experiences of sexual harassment in the workplace. As discussed in the previous section, women are the primary targets of sexual harassment, however this section examines the experiences of other key groups across the labour market and, where research exists, focuses on how this occurs for workers in the retail industry.

Women workers

A key theme in research on workplace sexual harassment, including in Australia, is that it most acutely impacts women as targets. Women across different life and career stages, working in different contexts and with a variety of personality and professional traits can all experience sexual harassment (Chamberlain et al., 2008; De Coster et al., 1999; Fitzgerald & Cortina, 2018; Folke & Rickne, 2022; Kensbock et al., 2015; Lopez et al., 2009; McDonald, 2012; McDonald & Charlesworth, 2016; McLaughlin et al., 2012, 2017; Roscigno, 2019). Overall, scholars agree that across these contexts sexual harassment at work occurs because of a woman’s gender and, as discussed in the previous section, many emphasise that it is a way in which men attempt to gain or exercise power in the workplace.

In retail: As previously discussed, several studies have demonstrated that in retail and other service work, women tend to be the targets and men the perpetrators and these experiences can be shaped by workplace norms (Good & Cooper, 2014, 2016; Handy, 2006; Hughes & Tadic, 1998; Leslie & Hauck, 2005; Tindell & Padavic, 2022).

Young workers

There is considerable evidence that young workers are more likely to experience workplace sexual harassment than older workers, and that the experience of workplace sexual harassment is particularly acute for young women (see, for example, Fineran & Gruber, 2009; McDonald et al., 2007). This aligns with a broader theme in the research that reveals young workers are subject to a range of other workplace violence including bullying, verbal abuse, physical assault and robbery (Breslin et al., 2007; Rauscher, 2008). Young workers are often unaware of issues such as managerial support, worker safety, and the formal process for submitting a formal grievance at their workplace (Kellner et al., 2011; McDonald et al., 2007; McDonald & Dear, 2005). These factors can lead this group to dismiss or ignore sexual harassment (Blackstone et al., 2014), and may lead them to see it as simply “part of the job” (Breslin et al., 2007).

In retail: Several studies have echoed these themes, showing that young female retail and other service workers are frequent targets of customer-perpetrated sexual harassment, particularly by older male customers (Brown et al., 2020; Good & Cooper, 2016; Hughes & Tadic, 1998). A qualitative study undertaken with young workers in the United States compared the experiences of sexual harassment and other types of workplace violence in workers aged from 15 to 17 and 18 to 24 years old. This revealed workers in the older group experienced more severe episodes of sexual harassment and physical assault, engaged formal mechanisms to report incidents, and recognised employer concern for customer satisfaction over employee safety. In contrast, younger workers were more inclined to report incidents of sexual harassment and assault to their parents (Brown et al., 2020). These findings point to the interplay between demographic factors and norms in service work that can make young workers particularly at risk of experiencing sexual harassment in retail.

Culturally and linguistically diverse women workers

Researchers have identified that women from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds often experience workplace sexual harassment and other forms of racially motivated abuse. Studies reveal CALD workers, particularly women, experience greater rates of sexual harassment than non-CALD women and men (see, for example, Berdahl & Moore, 2006, in the United States) and other forms of workplace discrimination (see, for example, Figueiredo et al., 2018; Hsieh et al., 2017; Moyce & Schenker, 2018). These findings have been described by researchers as a “double jeopardy”, capturing the unique experience of women who are disadvantaged due to both gender and race or ethnicity (Beal, 2008; see also Berdahl & Moore, 2006; Moyce & Schenker, 2018). This double jeopardy can, in turn, shape the response of CALD women workers to the experience of harassment at work. For example, a recent Australian study of migrant women agricultural workers found that fear of the impact on future work opportunities deterred complaints about sexual harassment, especially for workers with undocumented visa status (Howe et al., 2022). Reporting bias among people from CALD backgrounds is likely to lead to under-reporting of sexual harassment due to factors such as cultural differences, language barriers, and fear of losing a visa that is tied to employment (Papadakaki et al., 2021).

In retail: There is limited research on the issue of sexual harassment among CALD retail workers in both the Australian and international contexts. One exception is a US study among women supermarket workers, which revealed that culturally diverse women experienced significantly more sexual harassment from customers than non-minority women (Gettman & Gelfand, 2007).

First Nations workers

As numerous First Nations researchers have noted, the experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in work has been underexamined (see Diversity Council Australia/Jumbunna Institute et al., 2020), and this extends to research on the experience of sexual harassment at work. In our review, we identified just one study that explored Indigenous workers' experience of sexual harassment. This study of Mexican Indigenous farmworker women² working in the United States revealed Indigenous women were at significant risk of sexual harassment, and that this vulnerability was intertwined with broader patterns of social exclusion and economic disadvantage, including lower social status, cultural and linguistic diversity, and seclusion (Murphy et al., 2015). The lack of research in the Australian context points to a need for further studies on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their experiences of work, including workplace sexual harassment.

Male workers

Sexual harassment is a gendered phenomenon that predominantly affects women, but research has shown that men can also be targets. Prior studies have shown that men who are vulnerable to sexual harassment are often perceived by perpetrators as diverging in some way from stereotypical gender norms (Berdahl et al., 1996; McDonald & Charlesworth, 2016; Papantoniou, 2021, 2022). Once again, these studies have shown that men, rather than women, are the primary perpetrators of same-sex sexual harassment, which scholars attribute to hegemonic masculinity and power dynamics between men.

In retail: Our review found no prior studies of male workers' experiences of sexual harassment in the retail industry.

Workers with disability

There is very limited research on workers with disability and their experiences of sexual harassment in any kind of workplace. One US study examining 200 discrimination cases of workers with disability across various industry contexts revealed that women with disability were significantly more likely to experience harassment than men with disability (Dick-Mosher, 2015). Other scholars have asserted that women with disability experience both gender and disability discrimination, which can make them more at risk of harassment (see, for example, Chowdhury et al., 2022; Robert & Harlan, 2006). However, this review did not identify any studies that solely explored the experiences of workers with disability and sexual harassment at work, demonstrating a need for further research.

In retail: There are no available studies that explore the experiences of workers with disability in retail.

An intersectional lens

A core theme in the extant research indicates that intersectional identities shape how sexual harassment is experienced by individuals and groups, and influence how workplaces respond (Berdahl et al., 1996; Brown et al., 2020; Curtis Breslin et al., 2007; Dick-Mosher, 2015; Good & Cooper, 2016; Handy, 2006; Howe et al., 2022; Hughes & Tadic, 1998; Leslie & Hauck, 2005; McDonald et al., 2007; McDonald & Charlesworth, 2016; Murphy et al., 2015; Tindell & Padavic, 2022). Scholars consistently call for further research into the intersecting influences of age, race, sexuality, gender identity, ability and class (see, for example, Minnotte & Legerski, 2019). As the discussion of workplace norms and demographic groups has revealed, there is a need for a nuanced understanding of the interaction between worker characteristics, job types, and industry contexts.

² "Indigenous farmworker women often do not speak English or Spanish but one of many Indigenous languages like Zapotec, Mixtec and Triqui which are common in villages in southern and western Mexico" (Murphy et al., 2015, p. 1834).

Preventing and responding to sexual harassment: What works?

This final section explores research on interventions to address workplace sexual harassment. Key practices identified in the research are the implementation of policies to prevent and address the behaviour including providing staff and manager training, establishing robust reporting mechanisms, and promoting a safe and respectful culture through leadership. This review includes insights from various industries where measures are proven effective in preventing and addressing sexual harassment. Where research exists in retail, current responses to sexual harassment are explored.

Policies and practice

Studies indicate that workplace policy plays an important role in framing and shaping workplace understandings of sexual harassment. For example, scholars argue that where sexual harassment policies are more fully developed, there may be increased reporting (see, for example, de Haas et al., 2010; Diez-Canseco et al., 2022; Jacobson & Eaton, 2018). Researchers suggest that effective policies to prevent sexual harassment should clearly articulate what constitutes wrongful behaviour; be visible and widely circulated in workspaces; include grievance procedures and protections as well as management-initiated preventative strategies, and be linked to the goal of broader gender equality; and communicate reprisals to perpetrators (Butler & Chung-Yan, 2011; Foster & Fullagar, 2018; Haas et al., 2010; McDonald et al., 2015).

In retail: There is a lack of research on the implementation and efficacy of policies to address sexual harassment in the retail industry. However, scholars have called for policies to specifically address customer-perpetrated sexual harassment in the retail industry (see, for example, Handy, 2006; Madera et al., 2018; Walker et al., 2019).

Training

The extant research finds that training is an important mechanism to prevent and address workplace sexual harassment. Scholars identify that without knowledge and understanding of what constitutes workplace sexual harassment, reporting is less likely to occur, and gender inequalities are unable to be addressed (Minnotte & Legerski, 2019). Workplace training in sexual harassment delivers increased awareness, willingness and confidence to intervene in incidents of sexual harassment (Campbell et al., 2013; Diez-Canseco et al., 2022; Hock et al., 2020; Preusser et al., 2011; Relyea et al., 2020). Research also shows that training programs which treat workers as allies rather than potential perpetrators are more effective in addressing sexual harassment, while “forbidden-behaviour curriculum[s]” had a negative or no effect (Dobbin & Kalev, 2019, p. 12258; see also Hock et al., 2020; Katz & Moore, 2013; Potter & Moynihan, 2011). Furthermore, scholars suggest sexual harassment training must consider the unique characteristics of the industry as well as the demographics of the workforce, including age (Brown et al., 2020; Madera et al., 2019).

In retail: There has been no prior research exploring the implementation of sexual harassment training in retail. However, scholars have provided recommendations for training design. Researchers suggest training should equip workers with “tools” to address sexual harassment for targets, witnesses and managers, and include specific training on customer-perpetrated sexual harassment. Scholars also propose training for managers on how to mitigate risks to workers who are at risk of sexual harassment, such as young workers (Runyan et al., 2005).

Reporting

Scholars recognise that, while it is imperative for workplaces to implement measures to proactively prevent sexual harassment, effective reporting avenues are needed to address incidents when they do occur. Low reporting rates have been attributed to poor outcomes from co-workers, mishandling of reports, and concern about job loss or other negative repercussions, such as reputational damage (Butler & Chung-Yan, 2011; Foster & Fullagar,

2018). However, scholars found clearly articulated policies and training are effective mechanisms to increase reporting of sexual harassment incidents, and recommend them (Diez-Canseco et al., 2022; Haas et al., 2010; Jacobson & Eaton, 2018; Tseng & Kang, 2015). Research recommends effective reporting procedures include appropriate manager responses to complaints; multiple reporting channels, including external complaint handlers who are charged with “outreach, education and dispute resolution”; sanctions; and mediation (McDonald et al., 2015, p. 480).

In retail: The research shows that rates of reporting of sexual harassment are low among retail workers. Studies reveal retail and other service workers tend to cope with sexual harassment in informal ways, such as avoiding the harasser, ignoring the behaviour, joking about the incident, or minimising the experience (Good & Cooper, 2016; Handy, 2006; Hughes & Tadic, 1998; Leslie & Hauck, 2005; Tindell & Padavic, 2022). In the Australian context, studies indicate that when formal and institutional responses are made, managers or security are the most common stakeholders workers report incidents to (Good & Cooper, 2014, 2016).

Leadership and culture

Current research indicates workplace culture and leadership are important mechanisms to reduce the prevalence of sexual harassment and improve reporting outcomes when incidents do occur. Supportive workplace environments in general, including supportive supervisors, co-workers and culture, have been shown to reduce incidents of sexual harassment, and can influence a worker’s likelihood of responding to an incident (Buchanan et al., 2018; Chamberlain et al., 2008; De Coster et al., 1999; Mueller et al., 2001; Park, 2021; Tseng & Kang, 2015). Scholars have argued organisation-wide prevention starts by formal acknowledgement that sexual harassment exists. However, this must be followed up with clear communication and condemnation of the behaviour by supervisors, senior management and board members (Buchanan et al., 2014; Jenner et al., 2022).

In retail: One study that specifically explored the response to sexual harassment among Australian retail managers found managerial responses were often ineffective due to the tendency to deflect responsibility onto individual workers and thus to neutralise management responsibility. Organisational features of retail and service work contributed to this, including customer service norms, a lack of awareness or understanding by employers on how to respond to sexual harassment, and perceived lack of support from senior management or human resource teams (Walker et al., 2019; see also Good & Cooper, 2014, 2016).

Conclusion

The existing research on sexual harassment in retail, supplemented by insights on sexual harassment in the workplace more broadly, shows there are significant gaps in knowledge on how sexual harassment is experienced among retail workers. This review underscores a notable absence of data concerning sexual harassment in both the retail industry and workplaces in general, particularly among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers, culturally and linguistically diverse workers, gay men and workers with disability. Furthermore, there is a glaring lack of evidence regarding effective strategies for preventing and addressing sexual harassment in the retail industry and its related sectors.

Despite this, findings from this review are clear: sexual harassment can have severe consequences on workers, teams and organisations, and the economy more broadly; organisational norms in retail make this a high-risk industry for sexual harassment to occur in; certain demographic groups experience more workplace sexual harassment than other groups; and, while evidence is emerging from other industries, there is a lack of knowledge on effective interventions to address sexual harassment in retail.

CHAPTER 3

Methods

This chapter presents the four phases of the mixed method approach employed in this study.

Phase 1 – Quantitative analysis of large-scale survey data: A comprehensive quantitative analysis of available national survey data. We extracted relevant information from surveys and used statistical techniques to derive meaningful insights and trends related to sexual harassment.

Phase 2 – Interviews with key informants in the retail industry: To gain deeper insights into the issue of sexual harassment in the retail industry, interviews were conducted with key informants in senior roles in the industry.

Phase 3 – Data collection in focus groups with retail managers and workers: To capture the nuanced perspectives and experiences of retail managers and workers, a series of focus groups were undertaken.

The findings from each research phase were presented to the study's Expert Advisory Committee for feedback, comments and guidance. The committee's input helped refine the approach and ensure the relevance and applicability of the research. The section below provides a detailed description of the methodology used in each research phase.

Phase 1: Quantitative analysis of large-scale survey data

Data sources

The quantitative analysis leverages four pre-existing datasets to better understand the phenomenon of sexual harassment in the retail sector:

- The AHRC's *Time for Respect: Fifth National Survey on Sexual Harassment in Australian Workplaces*: This survey was administered by the AHRC between August and September 2022 to investigate the "prevalence, nature and reporting of sexual harassment in Australia, with a focus on workplaces" (AHRC, 2022, p. 7). The sample included 10,157 Australians aged 15 years and over. The sample included 331 retail workers.

- The AHRC's *Everyone's Business: Survey on Sexual Harassment of Members of the Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees' Association*: This reports the findings of a 2019 Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees' Association member survey that replicated the instrument and methodology adopted in the AHRC national surveys (e.g. AHRC, 2019). The survey included 3,413 respondents who had been employed in the past 5 years. Of these, 2,989 were employed in the retail industry.
- The Designing Gender Equality into the Future of Work (2021) dataset from the University of Sydney and the Australian National University: This dataset is the result of a nationwide online survey that was administered by IPSOS Social Research to their online panel between 28 September and 7 October 2021. It includes a broadly representative sample of 1,160 retail workers aged 16 and older, including 705 women (61%) and 455 men (39%). This survey is nationally representative of the sector in terms of region, sex and age.
- The Australian Women's Working Futures (2018) dataset from the University of Sydney: This survey is nationally representative of the labour market by region, sex and age. The survey was administered by IPSOS Social Research to their online panel in 2017 and had 2,664 respondents of whom 340 were retail workers.

Methodology

This quantitative chapter uses empirical data to provide a statistical analysis of sexual harassment in the retail industry. Among the four data sources used for this analysis, two are publicly available aggregate data (AHRC, 2019, 2022) and two contain individual-level disaggregated data (the Designing Gender Equality into the Future of Work 2021 and the Australian Women's Working Futures 2018 datasets), which allow for more granular, in-depth analysis.

The AHRC's fifth national survey (2022) and Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees' Association member survey (2019) datasets are used to describe the context and prevalence of sexual harassment at the national level and understand the specificity of sexual harassment in the retail industry compared to other industries in the Australian labour market.

The core of the analysis is conducted using the Designing Gender Equality into the Future of Work (2021) dataset. This survey allows us to conduct in-depth analysis on the cross-section of the experience of sexual harassment and labour market characteristics for retail industry workers. Because of the gendered nature of the experience of sexual harassment, the results of the analysis are gender disaggregated. It is important to note that all respondents of this survey identified as either male or female when responding to the question on gender identity.

Comparing the socio-demographic characteristics of targets of sexual harassment (i.e. individuals who have declared experiencing sexual harassment) to non-targets (i.e. individuals who have declared not experiencing sexual harassment) allows us to establish a profile of vulnerability. This analysis is conducted using descriptive statistics and regression analysis (see Appendix D).

This rich dataset also allows us to detect the relationship between targets of sexual harassment and perpetrators (i.e. co-workers or customers) for women and men employed in various occupations in the retail industry. This information is valuable in terms of implications for policy and practice.

Finally, the analysis of worker satisfaction with workplace policies allows us to distinguish whether risks are perceived as endogenous (e.g. co-worker harassment) or exogenous (e.g. customer harassment).

Using the Australian Women's Working Futures (2018) dataset, we were able to analyse specific topics, such as the interaction between migration (measuring one aspect of diversity) and sexual harassment. More specifically, we used regression analysis to observe the relationship between indicators of cultural and linguistic diversity (proxied by respondent place of birth and respondent parents' place of birth) and the experience of sexual harassment. We then detected whether this relationship is amplified in the retail industry using interaction variables.

Phase 2: Interviews with key informants in the retail sector

A total of 15 semi-structured interviews, on average 48 minutes in duration, were conducted online from November to December 2022. Interviews were conducted with participants who had extensive experience and operating knowledge of the retail industry, who represented large Australian retail employers ($n = 10$ participants), retail and associated industry associations ($n = 2$) and retail unions ($n = 3$). Participants had, on average, 6 years' experience in their current role and 16 years' experience working in the retail industry. Retail employer participants all worked within the human resource management or "people" function of their organisation and the sample included three employment relations specialists and two participants whose primary responsibility was work health and safety. Additionally, one retail employer made a written submission responding to the questions in the interview protocol.

About half of the interviewees ($n = 7$) provided the research team with a copy of their organisation's sexual harassment policy for analysis.

Phase 3: Focus group interviews with retail workers and managers

To deepen understanding of the experience and impact of sexual harassment on retail workers, and to inform worker-centric strategies to prevent and address those experiences, we conducted 12 online focus groups with 56 retail workers and managers across a range of retail industry sub-sectors. Focus groups were conducted in two separate rounds: mixed worker/manager focus groups, held in January and February 2023; and manager focus groups, held in April 2023.

Recruitment and data collection

Mixed worker and manager focus groups

For the first mixed worker/manager focus groups, we worked with a social research company to identify and recruit both retail workers and managers with relevant industry- and personal-level experience. The focus group sample frame was designed in response to the specific risk factors identified by the research team in the analysis of the extant research (presented in Chapter 2), quantitative survey data (presented in Chapter 4) and the interviews with key informants in the retail sector (presented in Chapter 5). The sample frame included groups deemed especially vulnerable to workplace sexual harassment by virtue of their gender, age, employment status, sexual orientation, cultural and linguistic background, the nature of the product being sold (e.g. intimate apparel), and/or size of industry sector (e.g. fashion retail and supermarkets). To ensure that all participants had relevant shared experiences, and to facilitate more open and unguarded discussion, participants were also selected based on having personally experienced, observed or been confided in by a colleague about an incident of sexual harassment while working in the retail industry. This resulted in the final sample matrix shown in Table 2.

Before each focus group, participants were asked to complete a pre-focus group survey which included questions on individual demographics, employment status, workplace type and experiences of sexual harassment in the retail industry.

Table 2: Final breakdown of participants in mixed worker/manager focus groups ($n = 50$)

Group	Gender ^a	Employment type	Age	Additional quotas	Retail segment
1	Women	Casual	18-40 years	Quota CALD $n = 2$	Fashion retailing
2	Women	Casual, part-time, full-time	18-29 years	Quota CALD $n = 2$	Fashion retailing
3	Men	Casual, part-time, full-time	18-29 years	Quota LGBTQI+ $n = 3$	Fashion retailing
4	Women	Casual	18+ years	Quota CALD $n = 2$	Small specialty - intimate apparel etc.
5	Women	Casual, part-time, full-time	18-29 years	Quota CALD $n = 2$	Intimate apparel
6	Women	Casual	18-40 years	Quota CALD $n = 2$ & mix of customer and non-customer facing	Supermarket
7	Women	Casual, part-time, full-time	18-29 years	CALD quota $n = 2$ & mix of customer and non-customer facing	Supermarket
8	Men	Casual, part-time, full-time	18-29 years	Quota LGBTQI+ $n = 3$ & mix of customer and non-customer facing	Supermarket
9	Women	Full time	30-50 years	Quota CALD $n = 2$	Mix: fashion, supermarket and small specialty
10	Men	Casual, part-time, full-time	18-29 years	None applied	Mix: fashion, supermarket and small specialty

Note: ^a Gender in the sample frame denotes people who identified either as a "woman" or a "man".

The mixed worker/manager focus groups were conducted between January and February 2023, and included a total of 50 retail workers and managers ($n = 39$ workers and $n = 11$ managers) in 10 online focus groups. Each group had an average of five participants (range 3-7) and was 90 minutes in duration. Each group was facilitated by two trained and experienced qualitative researchers, following a discussion guide developed by the entire research team and informed by the earlier phases of the study.

The facilitators worked with prompts which probed retail workers' and managers' understanding and experiences of sexual harassment in their workplaces, their understanding and experience of workplace mechanisms to prevent and respond to incidents, and their suggestions on how to improve organisational and industry-wide responses to such incidents.

Manager only focus groups

To further explore the specific experiences of retail managers on the prevention of, response to and management of workplace sexual harassment in the retail industry, we conducted a second round of focus groups with retail managers only. Due to budgetary limitations, the research team recruited participants directly in this round rather than using the social research company. Invitations to participate in the study were distributed via a social media advertisement distributed by major retail stakeholders, including the Australian Retailers' Association in their online newsletter *Retail Voice*, and the major retail union, the Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees' Association, on their national and state-based branch member Facebook pages.

Potential participants expressed their interest in participating by completing a screener survey hyperlinked in the social media advertisement. This screener survey largely replicated the survey distributed in the mixed worker/manager focus groups but asked additional questions specifically on management experience. As with the mixed worker/manager focus groups, participants were selected only if they signalled that they had personally experienced, observed or been confided in by a colleague or worker they manage about sexual harassment while working in the retail industry.

The initial intention was to recruit at least 24 additional managers in this round (four groups each with six participants), yielding a final target of around 35 managers. However, due to the managers' irregular and long working hours, and other methodological challenges, retail managers proved to be a very hard-to-reach population. In particular, the social media recruitment strategy we adopted yielded a small volume of expressions of interest. We received a total of 518 responses to the initial survey, of which we deemed 17 to be valid. Responses that were geolocated overseas such as responses from Africa, the United States, the United Kingdom and Europe, or where the employer name provided was not a legitimate retail employer, were deemed to be auto-generated "bot" responses and were discarded. We contacted those prospective participants who had expressed interest and who we deemed to be legitimate. Of the 17 we contacted, seven responded, provided their consent to take part in a focus group, and agreed to the specified time. One participant did not show up at the scheduled time. Given these challenges, the manager only focus groups yielded only two additional focus groups with a total of six participants, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Final breakdown of participants in manager only focus groups (n = 6)

	Gender	Employment type	Role type	Additional quotas	Retail segment
1	Women	Permanent full-time or part-time	Mid-level manager	None applied	Mixed (no fashion retail)
2	Men	Permanent full-time or part-time	Mid-level manager	None applied	Supermarket (n = 1) + other large retail manager

Including the 11 managers who participated in the mixed worker/manager focus groups, the manager focus groups yielded a final sample of 17 managers. We acknowledge that this falls somewhat short of the initial target and recognise this as a potential limitation of the study. We also identify retail supervisors and managers as a site of potential interest for future research on workplace sexual

harassment in the retail industry. These individuals are the frontline in the organisational response to sexual harassment so understanding their understanding, capability, motivations and actions is critical to building a thorough and nuanced understanding of how sexual harassment occurs and is dealt with in retail workplaces.

Participant profile

Retail workers

A total of 39 retail workers participated in the mixed worker/manager focus groups. In keeping with the feminised workforce of retail and the gendered nature of workplace sexual harassment, the sample included 28 women (72%) and 11 men (28%). Participants ranged from 18 to 40 years of age, with the average being 27 years. Participants worked in a range of retail settings, including fashion retail ($n = 18$, 46%), supermarkets ($n = 12$, 31%), intimate apparel ($n = 8$, 21%) and other large retail stores ($n = 1$, 3%). They were employed in casual ($n = 25$, 64%), permanent full-time ($n = 9$, 23%) and permanent part-time ($n = 5$, 13%) positions. Participants reported that they had personally experienced sexual harassment ($n = 34$), observed a colleague/s experiencing sexual harassment ($n = 27$) or been approached by a colleague for advice about sexual harassment ($n = 17$) while working in retail.³

Retail managers

A total of 17 retail managers participated in the mixed worker/manager focus groups and manager focus groups. The sample included 12 women (71%) and 5 men (29%). Managers were on average older than workers and were 19 to 67 years of age, with an average of 34 years. They worked in a range of retail settings, including supermarkets ($n = 7$, 41%), fashion retail ($n = 3$, 18%), intimate apparel ($n = 2$, 12%) and other large⁴ ($n = 3$, 18%) and small⁵ retail organisations ($n = 2$, 12%). The majority of managers were employed full-time ($n = 10$, 59%), with the remainder employed part-time ($n = 3$, 18%) or casually ($n = 4$, 24%). Of the participants, 11 reported that they had personally experienced sexual harassment, 12 reported that they had witnessed sexual harassment, and 13 reported that they had been approached by a colleague or staff they managed for advice about sexual harassment while working in retail.

Data analysis

Focus groups were audio- and video-recorded and professionally transcribed. Transcripts were de-identified and participants' names replaced with pseudonyms. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), taking an inductive approach to theme generation whereby themes were dictated by participants' expressed lived experiences of sexual harassment in the retail industry and organisational mechanisms to address these. After the mixed worker/manager focus groups, one research team member familiarised herself with the transcripts and coded a subset ($n = 5$, 50%) using NVivo20 software. The coding approach was discussed and refined with two senior research team members. This allowed for potential emerging themes in the data to be identified. The research team member then coded the remaining transcripts and organised the codes into higher-order themes and sub-themes. The manager focus group transcripts were coded using the same coding framework as the mixed worker/manager focus groups, with additional codes added as required (i.e. if the data did not "fit" the initial coding framework). Using the "crosstabs query" functionality in NVivo (which enables the researcher to explore what was said by different participant groups in relation to an identified code/s), similarities and differences in workers' and managers' experiences were identified. As there were many similarities between worker and manager accounts, we have chosen to present their accounts together, with managerial accounts drawn out where they relate specifically to their managerial role in workplace sexual harassment.

³ Respondents had to select at least one option for inclusion in a focus group and could select more than one option.

⁴ Large organisations were classified as those with an average of two or more workers during a shift.

⁵ Small organisations were classified as those with an average of one or two workers during a shift.

CHAPTER 4

Sexual harassment in the retail sector: Findings from survey data

This chapter analyses survey data to build a better understanding of sexual harassment in the retail sector. The chapter has two aims. First, it presents descriptive data on the incidence and risk of sexual harassment for various groups of retail workers. Second, this descriptive data provides the evidence base used to inform the design of the qualitative data collection presented in later chapters: the key informant interviews with retail sector managers (analysed in Chapter 5) and focus groups with retail workers and managers (analysed in Chapters 6 and 7). The findings reported in this chapter provide important contextual data to allow readers to better understand the challenges facing the retail industry to address sexual harassment and create more gender-equitable workplaces.

The extent and nature of sexual harassment at work are not easily discernible for employers, unions and policymakers. One of the main reasons for this is the lack of good data, an outcome of poor and inconsistent reporting. Survey data provides opportunities to understand the risk and prevalence of sexual harassment. The anonymous nature of survey data collection allows targets of sexual harassment to report information about their experiences without perceiving a risk to their safety or reputation. For the researcher, this means that although there is a risk of under-reporting, survey data is a reliable source that can be used to understand the extent of sexual harassment at work and its patterns.

This chapter leverages four survey datasets to empirically establish the context, the prevalence, the nature and the profiles of the targets of sexual harassment in the Australian retail sector. The chapter begins by reporting the trends highlighted in the AHRC's 2022 fifth national survey (AHRC, 2022) and Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees' Association member survey (AHRC, 2019). It then analyses the first-hand survey data from the Designing Gender Equality into the Future of Work (2021) and Australian Women's Working Futures (2017) datasets, using descriptive and inferential statistical methods.

Prevalence and forms of sexual harassment in the retail workforce

Specificity of sexual harassment in the retail workforce: Insights from a comparative analysis of industries

The AHRC's fifth national survey ("national survey") was conducted to "investigate the prevalence, nature and reporting of sexual harassment in Australia, with a focus on workplaces" (AHRC, 2022, p. 7). The national survey revealed that retail is a high-risk industry for sexual harassment, with a prevalence rate of 40 per cent over the previous 5 years, 7 per cent higher than the rate of the general working population (33%; AHRC, 2022, p. 111). Accommodation and food services was also identified as a high-risk industry, with a prevalence rate of 34 per cent (AHRC, 2022, p. 111)

Considering the significant rates of sexual harassment in retail trade and accommodation and food services identified in different waves of the national survey since 2018, the Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees' Association conducted a version of the national survey among its members. The results reinforced a key finding of the national surveys: retail is a high-risk sector for sexual harassment.

The Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees' Association survey reinforced key findings from the national survey. When compared to the general working population:

- the prevalence of sexual harassment in retail was higher
- the number of experiences of customer-perpetrated sexual harassment in retail was higher
- incidents in retail were more likely to occur at the person's immediate work environment (such as a workstation or cash register)
- men were more likely to be the perpetrators of harassment and women the targets in retail.

One of the key differences in the experiences of sexual harassment in the retail industry and accommodation and food service workforce compared to the broader workforce is the higher rate of client- or customer-perpetrated sexual harassment. In the previous 5 years, Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees' Association members reported that customer- or client-perpetrated sexual harassment accounted for 36 per cent of incidents (AHRC, 2019, p. 84), while the national survey found this was 19 per cent for the general working population where there was a single harasser (AHRC, 2022, p. 64). This could be attributed to the nature of interactive service work, where workers are "more likely to interact with external clients or customers" (AHRC, 2018, p. 62). This premise is supported by findings in the Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees' Association member survey, which also revealed that members working in the warehousing sector, where customer interaction is rare, were less likely to have experienced workplace sexual harassment than members who worked in fast food and retail (AHRC, 2019, p. 33).

Another distinguishing result is the location of sexual harassment. For retail and accommodation and food service workers, sexual harassment is more likely to occur at their workstation or the precise place where they carry out their work. While the workstation is a common area for sexual harassment to occur among the general working population (38%), incidents are higher for workers in the retail trade and accommodation and food services (45% of incidents; AHRC, 2022, p. 118).

Sexual harassment is a gendered phenomenon, and this is acutely so in retail. Among the general working population, in 77 per cent of incidents in the past 5 years, one or more perpetrators were male, while in retail trade, the proportion of male perpetrators accounted

for 86 per cent of all cases of sexual harassment (AHRC, 2022, p. 118). Women in retail are even more likely than the broader group of Australian women to be the targets of sexual harassment. In the past 5 years, 48 per cent of women in retail reported being sexually harassed at work, compared to 25 per cent of men in retail (AHRC, 2022, p. 114). Female respondents in the Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees' Association member survey were nearly twice as likely to experience client- or customer-perpetrated sexual harassment than men were (AHRC, 2019, p. 84).

Vulnerable population groups identified in the AHRC's national survey were also reflected among Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees' Association members. Those more at risk of workplace sexual harassment include women; members aged 18 to 29 years; members who identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, queer, asexual, undecided, not sure, questioning or other; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; and people with disability (AHRC, 2019, pp. 34–35). This reflects population groups who are most at risk of lifetime sexual harassment, as identified in both the AHRC's fifth national survey and Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees' Association member survey.

While the AHRC's fifth national survey and Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees' Association member survey provide valuable information on the general trends of sexual harassment in the workforce generally as well as in the retail industry, we leverage individual-level disaggregated data from the Designing Gender Equality into the Future of Work and Australian Women's Working Futures datasets to develop deeper insights.

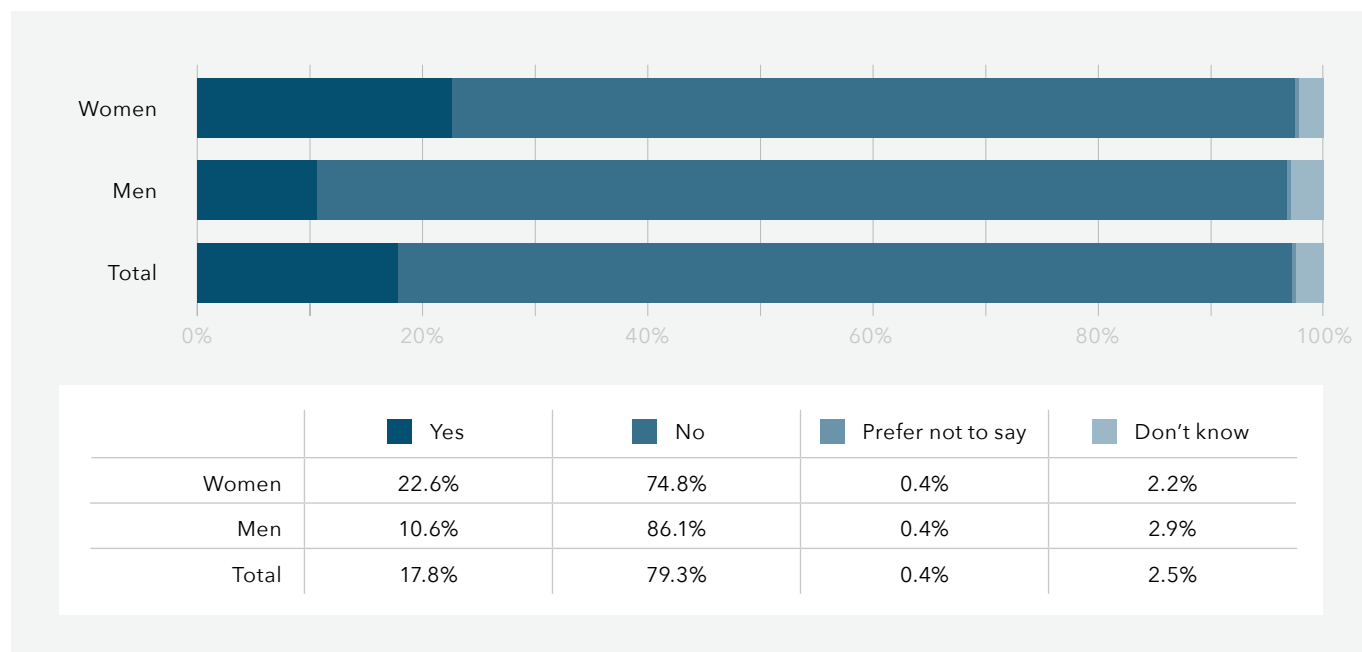
Prevalence and forms of sexual harassment in the retail workforce: Findings from Designing Gender Equality into the Future of Work (2021) survey

The Designing Gender Equality into the Future of Work (2021) dataset from the University of Sydney and the Australian National University is a rich dataset of retail workers which contains information about workers' experiences of sexual harassment and their perceptions of workplace policies aimed at addressing the issue.

The Designing Gender Equality into the Future of Work (2021) survey asked respondents whether they have experienced sexual harassment at work in the past 5 years.⁶ As shown in Figure 3, 18 per cent of respondents reported being targets during this time. This share was particularly high for women (23%) compared to men (11%). As a comparison, national statistics from the AHRC's fifth national survey show that 41 per cent of women and 26 per cent of men have experienced sexual harassment in the past 5 years (AHRC, 2022, p. 50).

Interestingly, 2 per cent of respondents declared that they did not know whether they had experienced sexual harassment, despite the explanatory note in the survey providing a definition: "Sexual harassment is unwelcome behaviour of a sexual nature that makes you feel offended, humiliated or intimidated." Although small, this share highlights some level of worker ambiguity about what constitutes sexual harassment. Moreover, men were marginally more likely to report that they "don't know" in comparison to women. This difference, although also small, is interesting considering that men were less likely to report sexual harassment than women, suggesting that there might be occurrences of under-reporting.

Figure 3: Prevalence of sexual harassment in the past 5 years



Source: Authors' calculations from Designing Gender Equality into the Future of Work (2021).

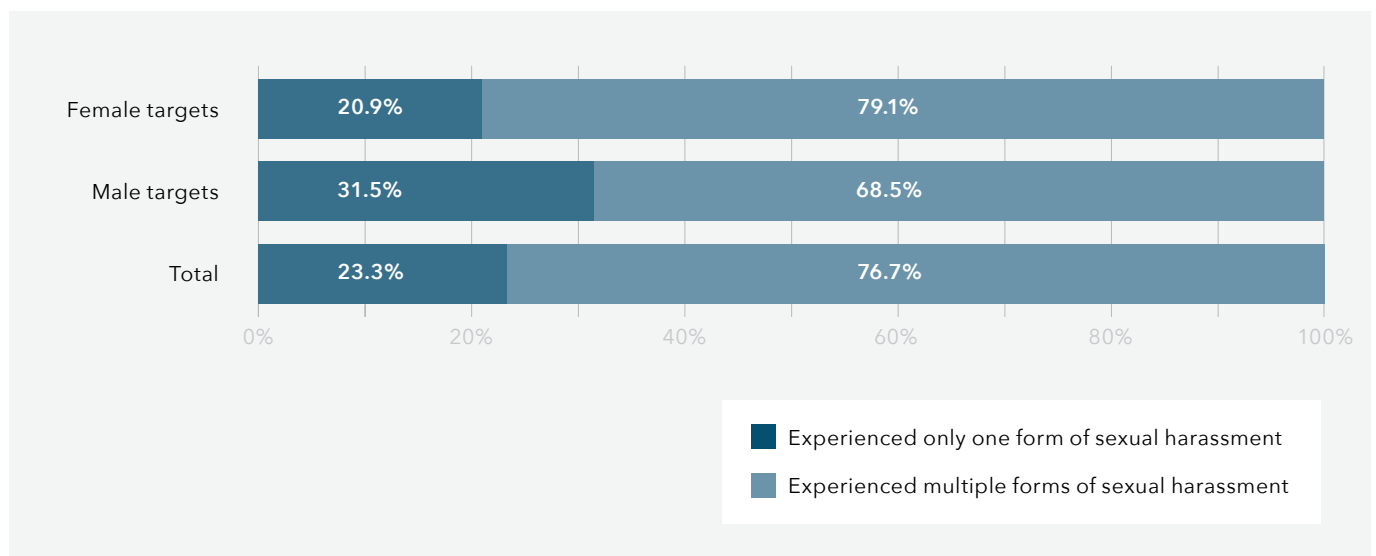
Note: $N = 1,160$ ($N_{\text{female}} = 706$; $N_{\text{male}} = 454$). Survey weights applied.

⁶ The question is the following: "In the past 5 years, have you ever personally experienced sexual harassment at work? Sexual harassment is unwelcome behaviour of a sexual nature that makes you feel offended, humiliated or intimidated."

Sexual harassment covers a diverse set of unwelcome behaviours that can fall along a spectrum. In the Designing Gender Equality into the Future of Work (2021) survey, the targets of sexual harassment were asked to describe the type of sexual harassment they experienced. Figure 4 shows the different forms of sexual harassment reported by targets of sexual harassment among the Designing Gender Equality into the Future of Work (2021) survey respondents. Note that respondents were able to choose multiple forms of sexual harassment when completing the survey. Figure 4 shows that the share of male and female targets who experienced one form of

sexual harassment, and the share of respondents who experienced more than one form of sexual harassment. Most workers who experienced sexual harassment suffered from a variety of unwelcome behaviours (69% of male targets and 79% of female targets) rather than a single form of sexual harassment (31% of male targets and 21% of female targets). Figure 4 also shows gendered trends in terms of overlapping behaviours of sexual harassment. Men were more likely, by 10 percentage points, to report one form of sexual harassment whereas women were more likely by 10 percentage points to report experiencing multiple forms of sexual harassment.

Figure 4: Single and multiple forms of sexual harassment experience



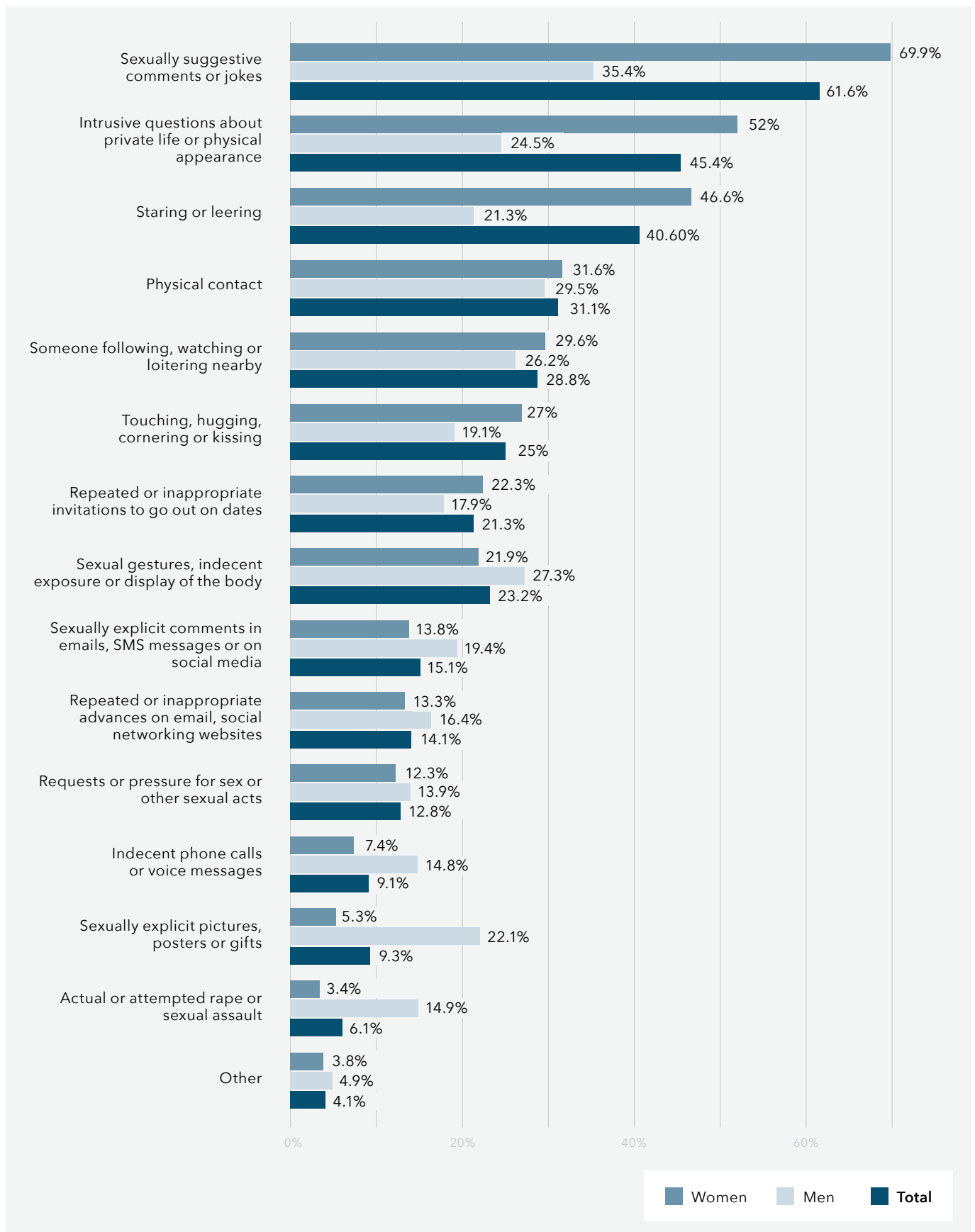
Source: Authors' calculations from Designing Gender Equality into the Future of Work (2021).

Note: $N = 203$; $N_{\text{female}} = 155$; $N_{\text{male}} = 48$. Survey weights applied. Each row sums to 100.0%.

Figure 5 shows that the most common form of sexual harassment experienced by retail workers is “sexually suggestive comments and jokes”, followed by “intrusive questions about private life or physical appearance” and “staring or leering”. Among the less common forms of sexual harassment, respondents reported “actual or attempted rape or sexual assault” and “sexually explicit pictures, posters or gifts”. There are important differences

to note in the experiences of male and female respondents in relation to the form of sexual harassment. Similar shares of men and women reported experiencing the most common forms of sexual harassment at work, while there were differences in terms of “actual or attempted rape or sexual assault” which was reported by 4 per cent of female targets compared to 15 per cent of male targets.

Figure 5: Forms of sexual harassment



Source: Authors' calculations from Designing Gender Equality into the Future of Work (2021).

Note: $N = 203$; $N_{\text{female}} = 155$; $N_{\text{male}} = 48$. Survey weights applied.

Establishing profiles of vulnerability of sexual harassment in the retail workforce

Drawing from intersectionality theory, this section identifies the socio-demographic and occupational factors that reflect particular forms of vulnerability for men and women in the retail industry. After reviewing descriptive statistics for various groups of the Designing Gender Equality into the Future of Work (2021) survey respondents, regression results present hotspots of vulnerability.

Descriptive analysis

Gender

Analysis above shows important gendered patterns and dynamics in the prevalence and forms of sexual harassment. While scholarship on sexual harassment usually focuses on women, the Designing Gender Equality into the Future of Work (2021) data shows that it is important to also consider men's experiences of sexual harassment in retail. While we present binary gender

disaggregated findings, it is important to note that our analysis does not account for the experiences of some workforce groups that were not captured by the survey. As described in Chapter 2, non-binary gender groups are potentially at risk of sexual harassment. Although statistics do not always reflect the specific risks these groups face, vulnerabilities of non-binary workers should be considered when designing policy tools.

Age

Young workers are disproportionately represented in the retail workforce (ABS, 2021a, 2022d; Australian Government, 2022). This makes age an important demographic factor in the analysis of sexual harassment in retail (Uggen & Shinohara, 2009).⁷ The Designing Gender Equality into the Future of Work (2021) data shows that the average age of targets of sexual harassment was 6 years lower than the age of non-targets (Table 4). This trend was visible both for men and women. Furthermore, female targets had a significantly lower average age (29 years old) compared to male targets (33 years old).

Table 4: Average age of respondents by sexual harassment experience and gender

	Targets of sexual harassment	Non-targets of sexual harassment
Women	29 years	34 years
Men	33 years	39 years
Total	30 years	36 years

Source: Authors' calculations from Designing Gender Equality into the Future of Work (2021).

Note: $N = 203$; $N_{\text{female}} = 155$; $N_{\text{male}} = 48$. Survey weights applied.

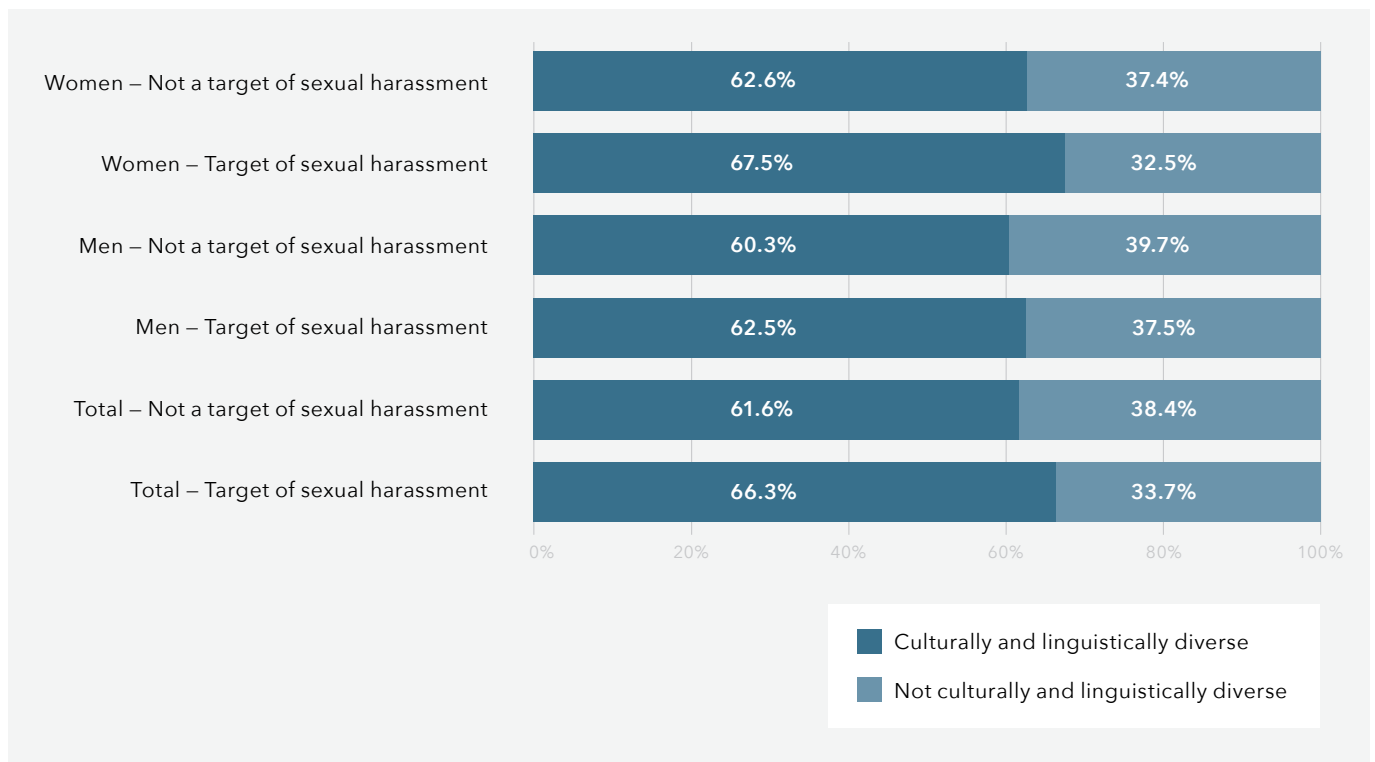
⁷Uggen and Shinohara (2009) explain how there are three types of mechanisms through which age and sexual harassment can be related. There can be a cohort effect, when an aggregation of individuals simultaneously experiences events. A cohort effect related to sexual harassment would only apply to people of a certain generation. There can also be a period effect which extends beyond the cohort and affects most people of the population at a given time. Finally, there is a possible direct age effect which relates to the "differential malleability of young people" making this group of the population particularly responsive to social change but also potentially more vulnerable (p. 206).

Cultural and linguistic diversity

As discussed in Chapter 2, workers' ethnic and cultural background is particularly relevant in the analysis of sexual harassment at work. Individuals from CALD backgrounds in the Australian workforce are an important part of the retail workforce.

The results from the Designing Gender Equality into the Future of Work (2021) survey in Figure 6 show that there is a minor difference between the share of CALD individuals among targets and non-targets of sexual harassment. This result suggests that in the Australian retail industry there is no relationship between the increased vulnerability to experiencing sexual harassment of individuals from CALD backgrounds and sexual harassment. However, this finding may be influenced by reporting bias, as discussed in Chapter 2.

Figure 6: CALD and sexual harassment



Source: Authors' calculations from Designing Gender Equality into the Future of Work (2021).

Note: $N = 1,160$ ($N_{\text{female}} = 706$; $N_{\text{male}} = 454$). Survey weights applied.

Box 1. Cultural and linguistic diversity and sexual harassment: What can data on respondents' place of birth from the Australian Women's Working Futures (2017) survey tell us?

An interesting question to consider for workers with a CALD background is whether their experiences of sexual harassment are rooted in forms of racism or whether other factors such as vulnerability incurred by lack of knowledge of employer and state regulation or language barriers have an effect. The Australian Women's Working Futures (2017) survey collected data on the place of birth of the respondent and the place of birth of their parents. The following analysis uses this information to test whether sexual harassment at work is correlated to physical traits or cultural traits. We define cultural traits as a worker's assimilation into local workplace and social practices (e.g. adopting specific communication norms or dressing a certain way) and the proxy used for physical traits is the place of birth. To conduct this test, we estimate if 1) being born abroad or 2) being born in Australia but having parents born abroad are significantly correlated to "sexual harassment". This analysis focuses on Asia as the alternative place of birth. The following hypothesis is tested via regression analysis, which will provide two coefficients of interest:

- If the coefficient of having parents born abroad is significant, it implies that sexual harassment is likely to be due to a physical rather than cultural characteristic of the worker, assuming second-generation immigrants have more similar cultural traits to Australian-born non-CALD workers.
- Conversely, if the coefficient of having parents born in Asia is not significant, it implies that the discrimination is solely due to cultural traits and not physical traits. It is the cultural distance from non-CALD workers that makes workers born in Asia more at risk of sexual harassment and not their physical traits, otherwise we see a similar experience for second-generation immigrants.

Since the place of birth can be quite diverse, we perform the test of the hypothesis by looking at an individual whose place of birth or parent's place of birth is in Asia. In the survey, 19 per cent of respondents have at least one parent born in Asia and 13 per cent of respondents were themselves born in Asia.

Variables	Ordered logistic model 1 <i>Sexual harassment (all women)</i>	Ordered logistic model 2 <i>Sexual harassment (sample restricted to women born in Australia and New Zealand)</i>
Place of birth of respondent = Asia	0.857*** (0.198)	
Place of birth of respondent's parent = Asia		-0.097 (0.250)

Source: Australian Women's Working Futures (2017). Survey weights applied. Standard errors in parentheses.

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

The two coefficients from the results summary table show the correlation between the dependent variable (columns) and the independent variables of interest (rows). A positive sign implies a positive relationship and a negative a negative relationship. The coefficients presented in the summary table allow us to make the following conclusions:

- Female workers born in Asia are more at risk of sexual harassment.
- Having a parent born in Asia is not significant, indicating that female workers with parents who are born in Asia are equally at risk (and not more or less at risk) of sexual harassment in comparison to other workers. Note that this sample only comprises workers born in Australia and New Zealand.

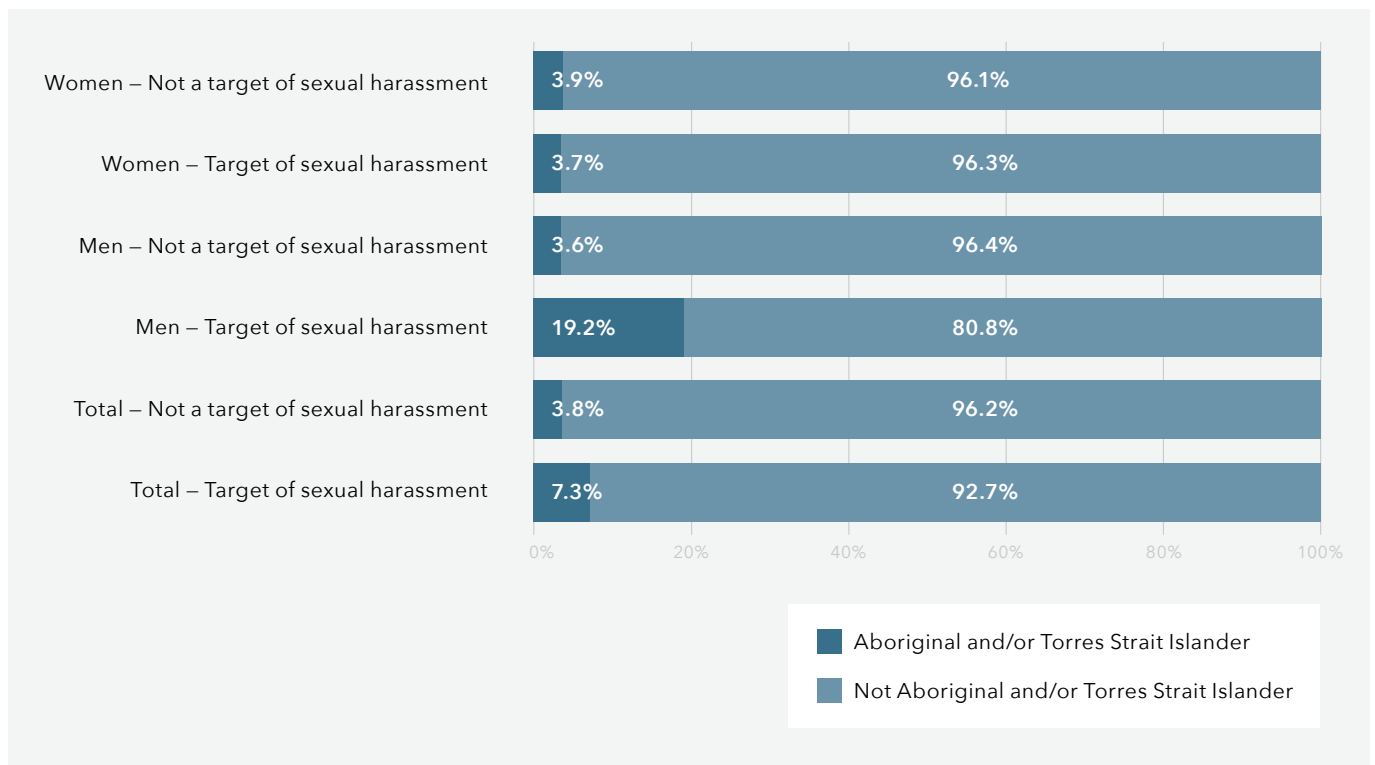
These results for Australian-born women with parents born in Asia suggest that sexual harassment is driven by cultural differences rather than physical ones. These cultural differences in the risk of experiencing sexual harassment could be due to multiple factors. For instance, one hypothesis could be that women workers born in Asia are less familiar with Australian workplace laws and culture and therefore more vulnerable to sexual harassment by male colleagues who fear a lower risk of retaliation. The length of time in Australia of female workers born in Asia could nuance our results. Unfortunately, this information is not available and further research should explore this hypothesis.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers

An intersectional analysis suggests that, similar to CALD individuals, individuals belonging to non-dominant groups in terms of culture and ethnicity in a society can face increased risks of sexual harassment. In the Australian workforce, workers with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage are likely to face such increased risks. In the Australian workforce, the prevalence of sexual harassment experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the past 5 years is 56 per cent while

for those who do not identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander it is 32 per cent (AHRC, 2022, p. 53). The *Designing Gender Equality into the Future of Work (2021)* data confirms this trend. Workers with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander heritage were more likely to be represented among the targets of sexual harassment. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander male workers reported very high levels of sexual harassment, with one in five respondents being targets in the past 5 years.

Figure 7: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage and sexual harassment



Source: Authors' calculations from *Designing Gender Equality into the Future of Work (2021)*.

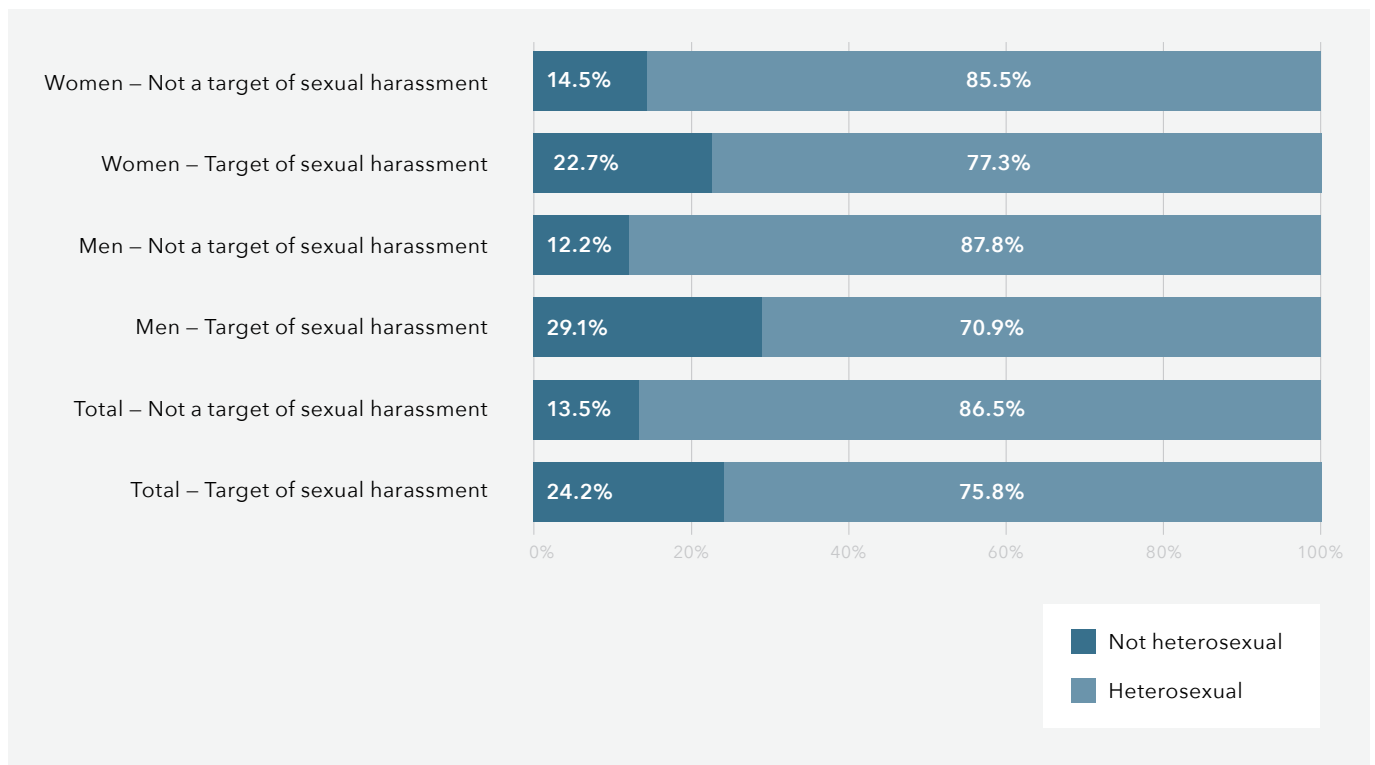
Note: $N = 1,160$ ($N_{\text{female}} = 706$; $N_{\text{male}} = 454$). Survey weights applied.

Sexual orientation

Because of the intrinsic link between gender, sexual orientation and power dynamics, sexual orientation is a potential vector of discrimination (Berdahl et al., 1996; Fitzgerald & Cortina, 2018; McDonald & Charlesworth, 2016; Papantoniou, 2021, 2022). Among the Designing Gender Equality into the Future of Work (2021) survey respondents, there was a relatively larger share of

individuals who self-identified as not heterosexual among targets of sexual harassment (24% of targets as opposed to 14% of non-targets). Male respondents who did not identify as heterosexual reported particularly high levels of sexual harassment (29%), followed by female respondents who were not heterosexual (23%; Figure 8).

Figure 8: Sexual orientation and sexual harassment



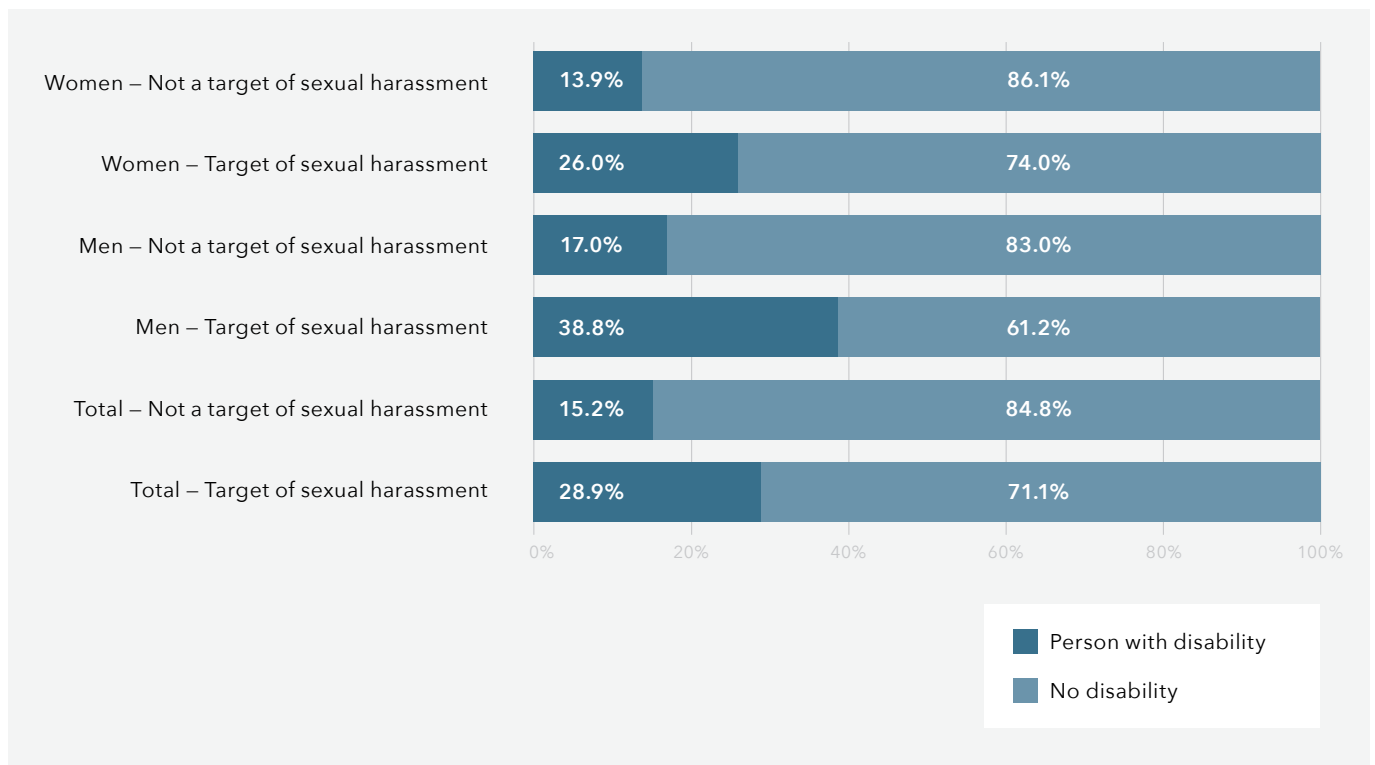
Source: Authors' calculations from Designing Gender Equality into the Future of Work (2021).

Note: $N = 1,160$ ($N_{\text{female}} = 706$; $N_{\text{male}} = 454$). Survey weights applied.

Disability status

Figure 9 shows that people living with disability were disproportionately represented among targets of sexual harassment (29%), compared to non-targets (15%). This trend was also visible for the gendered groups, more so for men who were living with disability (39%) than for women who were living with disability (26%).

Figure 9: Disability and sexual harassment



Source: Authors' calculations from *Designing Gender Equality into the Future of Work* (2021).

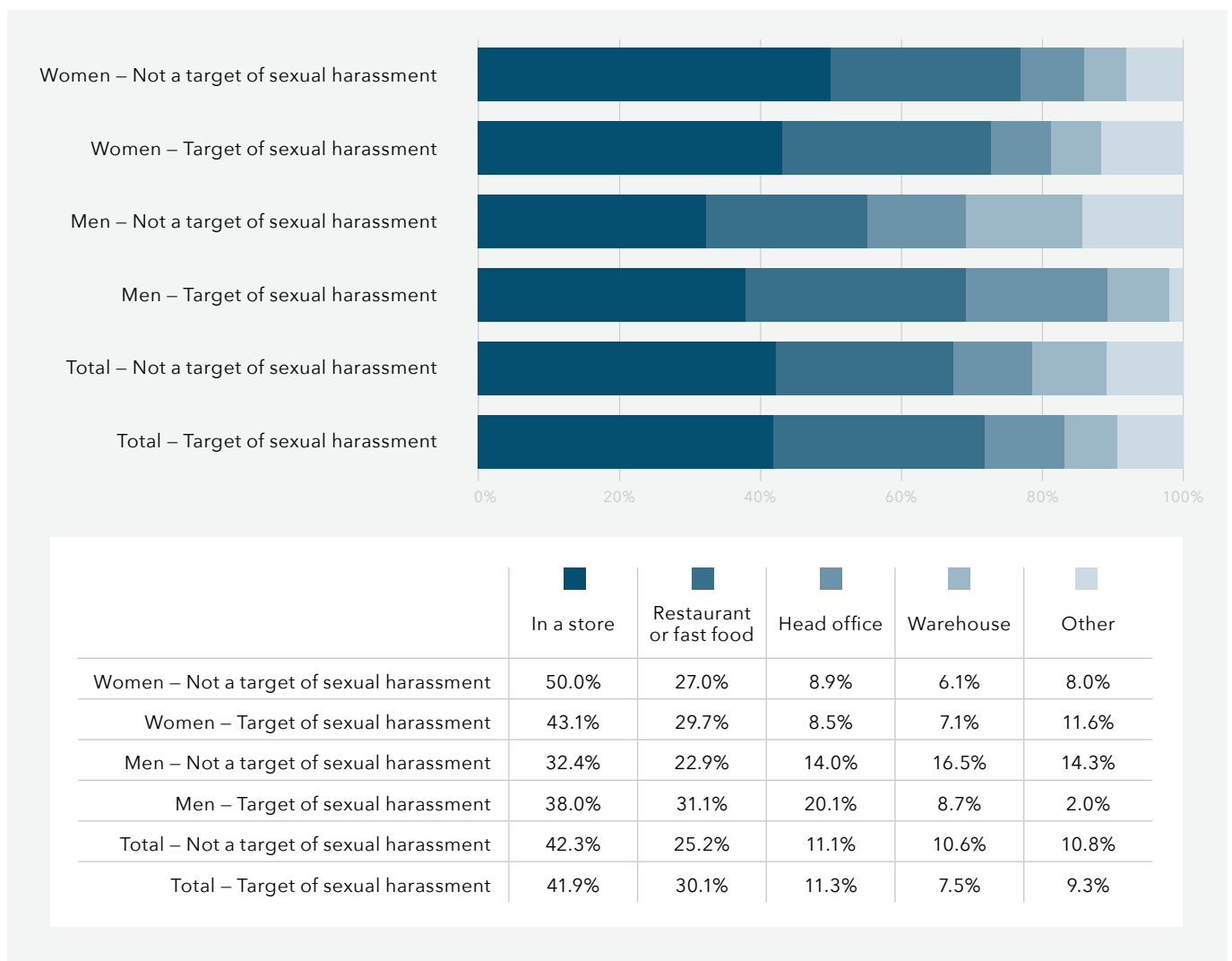
Note: $N = 1,160$ ($N_{\text{female}} = 706$; $N_{\text{male}} = 454$). Survey weights applied.

Occupational specificities

Although the retail industry presents a higher risk of sexual harassment for workers compared to other industries, identifying the occupational specificities that characterise sexual harassment experiences in the workforce can allow more targeted policy design. Our analysis focuses on workplace and working arrangements.

First, Figure 10 shows that targets and non-targets of sexual harassment had relatively similar distributions across workplace types. Nevertheless, it is possible to observe that among targets of sexual harassment there are marginally more individuals working in restaurants and fast food workplaces.

Figure 10: Workplace and sexual harassment



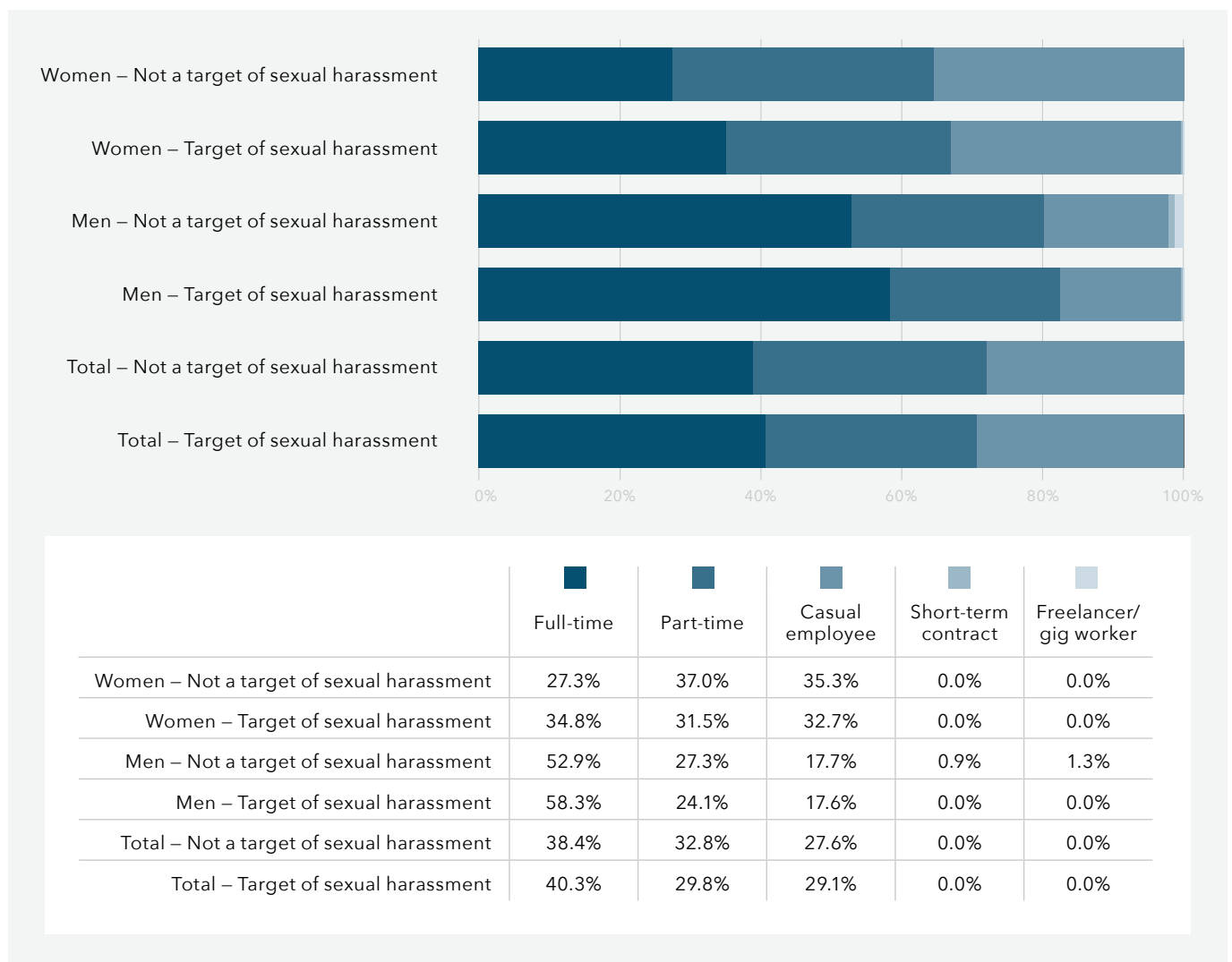
Source: Authors' calculations from Designing Gender Equality into the Future of Work (2021).

Note: $N = 1,160$ ($N_{\text{female}} = 706$; $N_{\text{male}} = 454$). Survey weights applied.

Second, Figure 11 shows that working arrangements can be a factor linked to sexual harassment. Two competing mechanisms are likely to impact workers: on the one hand, drawing from intersectional theory we could assume that casual or part-time workers are more likely to be targets of sexual harassment because they hold less power in an organisation. On the other hand, full-time

workers have a longer time to be exposed to perpetrators, placing them at potentially more risk. Figure 11 shows that there was in fact very little difference between the distribution of targets and non-targets of sexual harassment, perhaps reflecting the occurrence of both mechanisms.

Figure 11: Work arrangement and sexual harassment



Source: Authors’ calculations from Designing Gender Equality into the Future of Work (2021).

Note: N = 1,160 (N_{female} = 706; N_{male} = 454). Survey weights applied.

Identification of hotspots through regression analysis

Regression analysis is used to observe the determinants of sexual harassment and identify the “hotspots” of sexual harassment in the Australian retail industry. We define hotspots as the general demographic and work characteristics of workers that put them more at risk of sexual harassment. The results are summarised in Table 5. Appendix D presents the method and the full results table.

Regression results allow us to identify which of the factors that have been described in earlier sections (e.g. gender or age) are significant determinants of sexual harassment when other factors are controlled for. Observing a difference between two groups of workers can reflect a true difference or can be a consequence of some other characteristics of the sample. Disentangling the determinants of sexual harassment from potential statistical artefacts (i.e. differences between groups that do not represent systematic trends) can deepen our understanding and inform targeted and tailored interventions.

Table 5 shows, when controlling for other factors, the variables that pose a positive risk of sexual harassment are being a woman, being of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander heritage, identifying as LGBTQI+, living with disability, working in wholesale and “food and beverages” workplaces as opposed to in a store, and being a union member. The variables that represent a decreased risk of sexual harassment are age (i.e. being older) and working in a retail warehouse as opposed to in a retail store.

Table 5: Determinants and hotspots of sexual harassment - Summary of regression results

Socio-demographic and employment characteristics	Whole sample	Men	Women
Women	+		
Age	-	ns	-
CALD	ns	ns	ns
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples	ns	+	ns
Person identifying as not heterosexual	+	ns	ns
Person with disability	+	ns	+
Industry (ref. financial services)			
Marketing	ns	ns	ns
Automotive	ns	ns	ns
Retail	ns	ns	ns
Wholesale	ns	+	ns
Food and beverages	+	+	+
Work location (ref. in a store)			
Restaurant	ns	ns	ns
Head office	ns	ns	ns
Warehouse	ns	-	ns
Other	ns	na	ns
Union member	ns	+	ns
Work status (ref. full-time)			
Part-time	ns	ns	ns
Casual worker	ns	ns	ns
Short-term contract	ns	na	ns
Freelancer/gig worker	ns	na	ns
Annual income group (ref. less than \$15k)			
\$15k-25k	ns	ns	ns
\$25k-40k	ns	ns	ns
\$40k-60k	ns	ns	ns
\$60k-80k	ns	ns	ns
\$80k-100k	ns	ns	ns
\$100k-150k	ns	ns	ns
More than \$150k	ns	ns	ns
Year 12 of high school and below	-	ns	-
Observations	994	343	595

- Negative (decreased) risk + Positive regression coefficient ns Not significant coefficient
- Positive (increased) risk - Negative regression coefficient na Not applicable (no observations)
- No significant risk

Source: Authors' calculations from Designing Gender Equality into the Future of Work (2021).

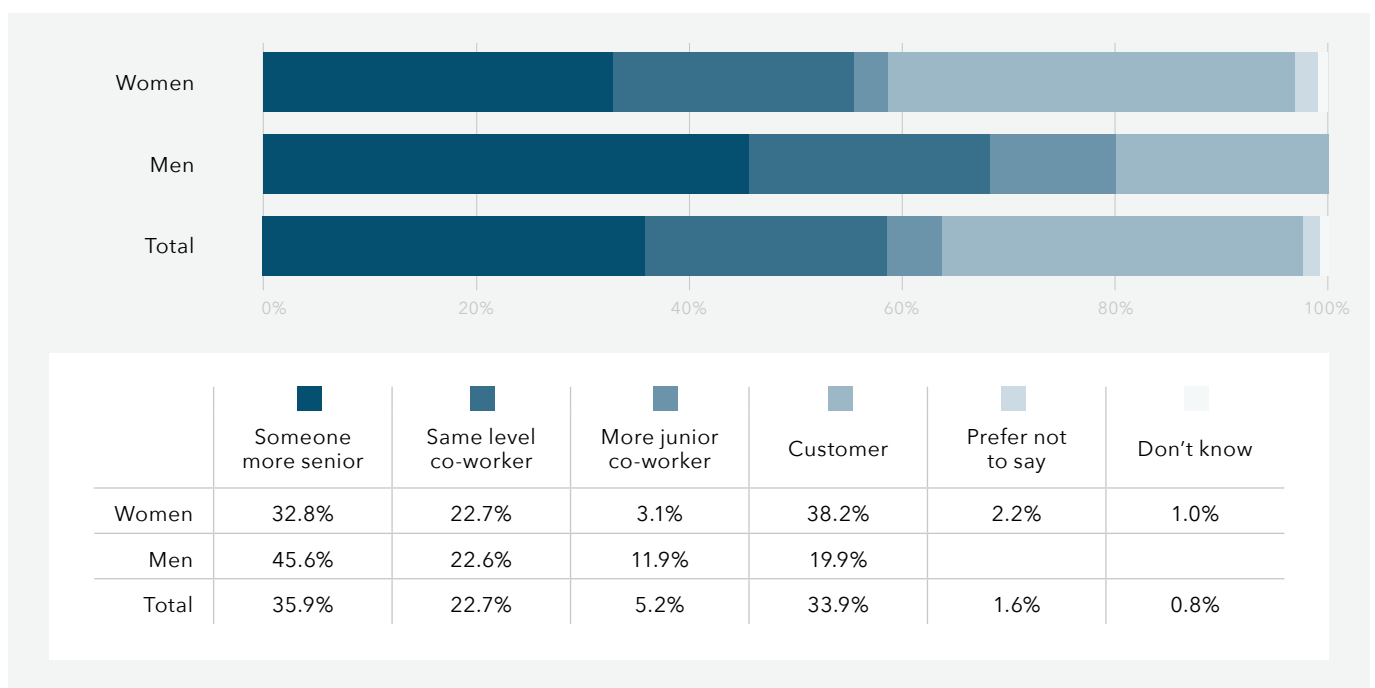
Note: Full table available in Appendix D and descriptive statistics of regression variables available in Appendix E. The total number of observations is 994. Note that 56 observations were dropped because of collinearity in the male sample.

Perpetrators, witnesses, bystanders and reporting: A culture of sexual harassment?

Perpetrators of sexual harassment in the retail industry

Figure 12 shows that more than half of the perpetrators of sexual harassment among the Designing Gender Equality into the Future of Work (2021) respondents were internal to the organisation (co-workers) and about one third were customers. Women faced a larger threat from customers (38% of women being harassed) in comparison to men (20% of men being harassed). Most of the perpetrators of sexual harassment against male targets were senior co-workers (46%).

Figure 12: Relationship of target to perpetrator of sexual harassment



Source: Authors' calculations from Designing Gender Equality into the Future of Work (2021).

Note: $N = 1,160$ ($N_{\text{female}} = 706$; $N_{\text{male}} = 454$). Survey weights applied.

The Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees' Association member survey reveals that customer perpetrators exhibit repetitive behaviours that put workers at risk. Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees' Association members reported that they were likely to experience repeated sexual harassment by the same customer. In the past 12 months, one in three members reported they had been sexually harassed by the same perpetrator multiple times (AHRC, 2019, p. 90). Despite the prevalence of customer-perpetrated sexual harassment, most Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees' Association members who had been sexually harassed by a customer were unsure if their employer had "a reporting mechanism in place", while only 20 per cent indicated that they did, and another 24 per cent stated there was no such mechanism (AHRC, 2019, p. 90). Only one quarter reported the incident to their employer. Of these, only 25 per cent indicated their report had been investigated (AHRC, 2019, p. 90).

Reluctance to report

Most incidences of workplace sexual harassment did not result in the target making a formal report or complaint or in the target seeking support or advice. Among Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees' Association members who had experienced sexual harassment in the past 5 years, only 13 per cent made a formal report or complaint of the latest incident (AHRC, 2019, p. 97). This is lower than the general workplace population where reporting occurred among 17 per cent of workers who were sexually harassed in the past 5 years (AHRC, 2019, p. 98).

The most common reasons for not reporting among Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees' Association members included the belief that it would be seen as an "overreaction" (AHRC, 2019, p. 112), or it was easier to keep quiet, or the incident "was not serious enough" (AHRC, 2019, p. 113). However, poor or insufficient outcomes or lack of clarity about process and potential outcomes may also contribute to workers' reluctance to report.

Formal reports or complaints of workplace sexual harassment mostly did not result in workplace change. In over a quarter of cases there was no consequence for the harasser (AHRC, 2019, p. 107). Consequences for the harassers of Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees' Association members were less frequent than for the general working population. Furthermore, while incidents of customer-perpetrated sexual harassment were reported to an employer in a quarter of cases, the majority were not investigated. The satisfaction with reporting outcomes was lower for Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees' Association members than for the general working population (AHRC, 2019, p. 110).

The most common result for workers of making a report was no outcome, however they could experience negative consequences such as being "ostracised, victimised or ignored by colleagues; having their shifts changed; being labelled as a trouble-maker; or resigning" (AHRC, 2019, p. 106). This attests to a need to enhance reporting mechanisms in policies, procedures and outcomes for workers.

Bystander inaction

Most incidences of workplace sexual harassment that were witnessed did not result in bystanders taking any action. The most common reason for this was knowing that others were supporting or assisting the target (AHRC, 2019, p. 12). Other common reasons were not wanting to make things worse for the target, not wanting to get involved, or being asked by the target not to take action (AHRC, 2019, p. 128).

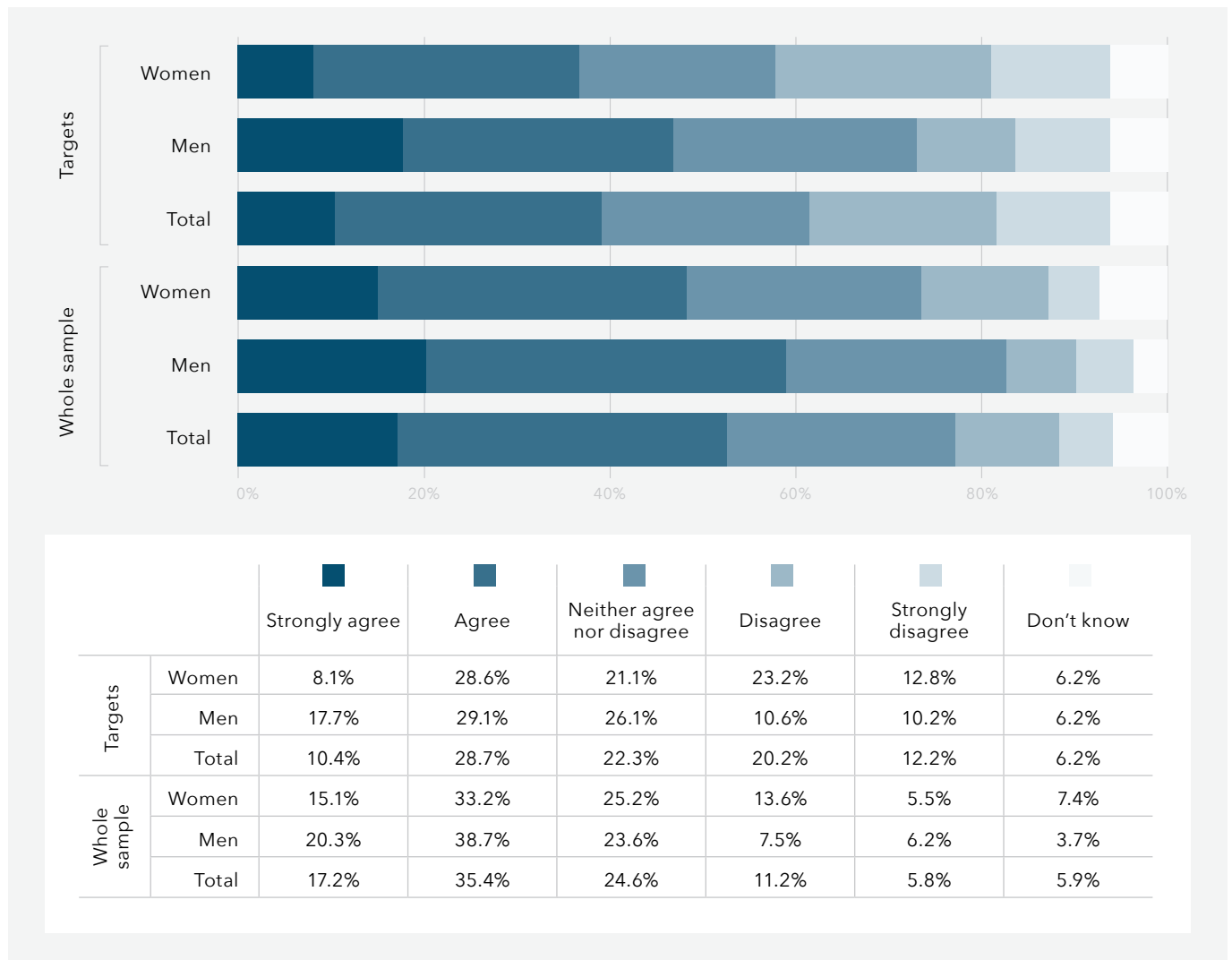
When action was taken, the most common response was to talk to or listen to the target. The next most common response was to report to the employer. Generally, there were no consequences from employers or colleagues for the bystander for taking action (AHRC, 2019, pp. 126–127).

Workplace sexual harassment policies: Ineffective remedies?

When asked about their perception of whether sexual harassment was adequately addressed in their workplace, 17 per cent of the whole sample disagreed and 32 per cent of targets of sexual harassment disagreed (Figure 13). The fact that two thirds of targets of sexual harassment at

work believed that their workplace policy was adequate indicates that sexual harassment at work is perceived as an exogenous factor that employers cannot necessarily address. For instance, this might be related to the feeling that organisations cannot do anything against customer-perpetrated sexual harassment.

Figure 13: Sexual harassment adequately addressed in my workplace



Source: Authors' calculations from Designing Gender Equality into the Future of Work (2021).

Note: N = 1,160 (N_{female} = 706; N_{male} = 454). Survey weights applied.

Most Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees' Association member survey respondents reported that their employer had policies, procedures or training in place to prevent sexual harassment. The majority had completed training upon induction. Despite this, the prevalence of workplace sexual harassment is high, levels of reporting low, and outcomes often inadequate. This may reveal deficiencies in current policies and training to address workplace sexual harassment. Nevertheless, the data also indicate that sexual harassment may be

more prevalent in workplaces without procedures, policies or training (AHRC, 2019, p. 139) and that there may be less awareness of such policies and procedures in larger organisations, while those workers in smaller organisations may have "a better understanding" (AHRC, 2019, p. 140).

In the next chapter we explore these hotspots, alongside other dimensions of concern highlighted in the literature, through focus groups with key workers.

CHAPTER 5

Key informant perceptions and experiences of sexual harassment within the retail sector

This chapter presents the findings from Phase 2 of the research, which involved conducting key informant interviews ($n = 15$) plus receiving one written submission to examine the measures taken by retail employers to prevent and respond to sexual harassment in their workplaces. The analysis addressed several primary focus areas of our project: insights on the occurrence and characteristics of sexual harassment within organisations; factors that contribute to increased risk of harassment for workers; perpetrators; organisational policies on sexual harassment prevention and response; the content, scheduling and methods of delivery of sexual harassment training programs; reporting procedures for targets and bystanders; potential causes of under-reporting; preventive actions; and organisational processes for collecting, analysing and reporting data on sexual harassment. The interview data provide valuable insights into current organisational practices and potential avenues for improvement in preventing and addressing sexual harassment in the retail industry.

Sexual harassment dimensions and risk factors

Participants were asked about the incidence and characteristics of sexual harassment within their organisations, and the factors which may increase workers' risk of experiencing harassment.

Incidence and characteristics of sexual harassment

Interview participants observed that sexual harassment in their organisations was typically perpetrated by a man on a (often younger) woman, though they acknowledged that both men and women could be the targets of sexual harassment. They reported that the most common forms

of sexual harassment were inappropriate comments and jokes, while incidents of sexual harassment that were physical in nature were reported to be relatively uncommon. It was noted that sexual harassment could be perpetrated by people internal to the organisation, such as the target's managers or colleagues, or by customers and other third parties such as security personnel or suppliers:

One of the idiosyncrasies of retail is that we deal with the general public. So sexual harassment can come not only from internal within a store or head office, it can also come from the general public and often does. And this is partly what makes retail unique to many other situations. (Alex, employer association)

Consistent with recent research in the retail industry (Vromen et al., 2021), participants perceived that there had been an increase in customer-perpetrated harassment and abuse, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. They also reported a rise in sexual harassment perpetrated via social media and online work platforms and apps where colleagues or customers (for external platforms) could find and target workers outside of their normal work environment and hours. This included making unwanted advances, and sending inappropriate messages or nude images via digital platforms:

What this is doing is that people are getting access to anyone they work with, where ordinarily in the past you could've just said I'm not giving you my number or whatever it might be. It's blurring those lines a little bit more ... taking it from the workplace and extending outside of work hours, outside of the workplace and continuing these things on. (Samantha, union representative)

Risk factors for sexual harassment

Several factors were identified by participants as increasing employees' risk of being harassed, including employee demographics, isolation in the work context, and the nature of the product being sold. Consistent with the extant research, women, younger workers, people in precarious work arrangements such as casual workers, LGBTQI+ workers, CALD workers and workers with disability were identified by participants as being at greater risk of experiencing sexual harassment, and less likely to report such experiences. Participants acknowledged that the retail workforce had a concentration of these groups at higher risk, making sexual harassment more likely than in other work contexts. This risk and vulnerability was explicitly noted in some retail employer policy statements:

[Retail has] a large proportion of younger employees, as well as part-time and casual employees, and employees from other diverse backgrounds [i.e. LGBTQI+, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, migrant workers etc.] which are statistically at more risk of sexual harassment. (Jordan, specialist manager)

Of these demographic risk factors, age was cited as the most prominent risk factor for sexual harassment. Specialist managers, industry association and union representatives all perceived younger workers to be particularly at risk of experiencing sexual harassment in the workplace, and acutely ill-equipped to recognise or report incidences of sexual harassment. Some participants noted that minors were commonly the targets of sexual harassment in retail workplaces and dealing with these sorts of cases formed a large part of their work:

We continually receive matters where there's a 15-year-old or 16-year-old and their first jobs, normally female being sexually harassed by men. Normally men, much older, and sometimes 60-year-olds. (Amara, specialist manager)

The work environment itself was also cited as a risk factor for sexual harassment. Participants commented that working in isolation, or within small teams with less regular supervision, or in secluded areas without surveillance (such as fitting rooms) put workers at increased risk:

It is often those secluded areas, often in cool rooms, or it's done behind closed doors, or in departments where there's only one or two people working in that department so there's no witnesses. (Rina, employer association)

Interviewees argued that the nature of the product being sold could also increase risk. Participants commented that selling sexualised products (that are made to "objectify women ... through advertising, marketing and conditioning"; Alex, employer association) such as intimate apparel could enable inappropriate customer behaviours. For example, one interviewee noted that employees selling intimate apparel were frequently subjected to innuendo and suggestive comments:

The types of questions will be, "Oh well, my wife is about your breast size. So what size are you?" And "Do you like the feel of this product on you?" (Bianca, specialist manager)

Sexual harassment policy

Interviewees employed by retail businesses were asked to describe who was primarily responsible for dealing with sexual harassment within their organisation. For most, sexual harassment was seen primarily as the domain of human resources (HR), who oversaw the development of sexual harassment policies, procedures and training and responded to and investigated complaints escalated to them. In some cases, other functions such as risk and safety, diversity and inclusion, employment relations and legal were involved. In some organisations, sexual harassment complaints were handled differently depending on the perpetrator of the harassment. Customer-perpetrated harassment was commonly treated as a work health and safety issue, while harassment perpetrated by the organisation's employees was treated as an HR issue. In these organisations, as a result, there were different processes for workers to report these issues, and issues were handled by the appropriate team independently.

Content of sexual harassment policies

Most (7 out of 10) specialist managers we interviewed provided copies of their organisation's sexual harassment policies for analysis by the research team. Of the seven specialist managers who provided policy documents, none reported having a standalone sexual harassment policy. Rather, sexual harassment was generally included within the employers' compendium policies on bullying, harassment and discrimination or within the organisation's manual on the employee code of conduct. Within these policies, sexual harassment was addressed as an independent issue to varying degrees. Less than half (3 out of 7) of the employers had a specific section within these policies on sexual harassment and the remainder included sexual harassment under the broader topic of harassment (3 out of 7) or within sections of codes of conduct (1 out of 7).

Definition of sexual harassment

Just over half of policies examined (4 out of 7) provided a definition of sexual harassment that was adapted from the definition provided in the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* (Cth), while the remainder (3 out of 7) provided a unique definition. The definitions of harassment set out in these policies varied in nature and the degree of specificity. Some definitions even made no reference to "sex" or "gender", as exemplified in the definitions below:

Policy 3 Harassment is inappropriate behaviour that makes another person feel uncomfortable or unsafe. It is unwanted, offensive or intrusive behaviour, verbal or physical conduct that threatens, intimidates or coerces an employee(s).

Policy 4 Harassment occurs when a conduct violates the dignity of a person and creates an intimidating, threatening, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment.

Most employers' policies included an extensive bulleted list of behaviours that might constitute examples of sexual harassment specifically (5 out of 7), ranging from sexual comments, jokes and innuendo to unwanted physical contact and sexual assault. Of the remaining employer policies, one included three examples of sexual harassment behaviours within an extensive list of actions which may constitute harassment more broadly and one included only one example of sexual harassment as a scenario. Most employer policies (5 out of 7) included at least one example of technology-mediated sexual harassment such as unwelcome or offensive calls, text messages or emails or sending sexually graphic material via an instant message. Of these policies, three mentioned social media. Only two employers' policies outlined behaviours which *are not* considered sexual harassment ("interactions that are consensual, welcomed, and/or reciprocated"; Policy 1).

Sexual harassment complaints process

The process for reporting complaints of any nature, including sexual harassment complaints, was outlined to varying degrees in employers' policies. Of the policies provided, all specified to whom workers should turn to report within the organisation, and one additionally provided a list of external organisations from which workers could seek help or advice. Less than half (3 out of 7) clearly stated that the reporting processes applied to those who had either experienced *or* observed sexual harassment in the workplace. Contact details such as phone numbers or emails for each of the given reporting options or directions on where workers could go to find these were typically not set out in the policy documents. However, one employer's code of conduct had a page comprehensively outlining the steps which workers who had experienced or observed incidents could take, including hyperlinks, emails and phone numbers to all the respective options mentioned. This level of detail and specificity made the policy striking among the group.

Sexual harassment resolution process

There was also variation in the degree to which the process for resolving sexual harassment complaints was outlined in employers' policies. While more than half (4 out of 7) of the policies described the possible outcomes for the perpetrator (typically ranging from conciliation to disciplinary action, up to and including termination of employment), only a small number (2 out of 7) described the resolution process or what workers could expect to happen after they had made a complaint. Just under half (3 out of 7) of the policies noted that complaints would be kept confidential "where possible". Three employers' reporting and resolution processes were outlined in detail in a separate policy document, such as a grievance handling policy or workplace resolution policy.

Availability and accessibility of sexual harassment policies

Participants were asked where workers could find and access these policies. Policies were generally mentioned by employers during the commencement of employment induction training and then made available to staff via the employer's intranet. To increase policy accessibility, some employers had several approaches for making policy documents available to workers, for example, via posters in stores, hard copies of policies in the workplace or as clauses in enterprise agreements.

We have compulsory annual training [online] that informs staff of our policies and how to find them, including links. We also have a manned phone service/online chat bot for employees that can direct them to policies and answer questions about policies. In addition, we have site-based posters that direct team members to our policies and are in the process of placing hard copies of our code of conduct into frontline sites. (Jordan, specialist manager)

Perceptions of sexual harassment policy accessibility

Some interviewees raised concerns that their employees had limited knowledge of company policies or where to find them, or that the policies were difficult for workers to understand. Interviewees felt that there was room for improvement in the policies as a result. Most interviewees reported that the main way for workers to access their organisation's materials was via the intranet. However, one specialist manager commented that this was inadequate to ensure staff awareness:

They're available on our portal. In reality, I don't think it's something that most team members would see on the portal. We do have training in workplace behaviour, which employees conduct regularly, and that mentions the [relevant] module and where to find it, but it's certainly not available to them in stores or sites or in tea rooms or anything like that. It's not easy, many of them aren't aware of it, unfortunately. (Rachel, specialist manager)

Despite reporting processes being outlined in policy, the union representatives we interviewed noted that workers commonly struggled to identify who to report incidents to and to locate their contact details, exemplified in one participant's description of the significant number of times she had been approached by retail workers for this information:

The amount of times I have to give out the number or the email for [a major supermarket] to people who have been members for 10 or 15 years. I think that's probably a telling sign as to they're [employers are] not necessarily making it readily accessible and/or they make it readily accessible after someone's put a complaint. (Samantha, union representative)

Additionally, outlining the complaints and resolution processes in a separate policy document was seen by one union representative as "a real barrier" (Karina) to workers accessing this information and reporting.

Some manager interviewees were critical of their organisation's policies, describing them as being vague and "high level" (Rachel, specialist manager) or "written very much from a legal compliance perspective" (Mason, specialist manager) and thus difficult for workers to understand. Brief, plain-English communications using "simple and straightforward language" (Mason, specialist manager) were seen as best practice and much needed to ensure accessibility.

Sexual harassment training

Delivery and content of sexual harassment training

Participants were asked to describe the approach and content of their organisation's sexual harassment training, and where, when and how this training was conducted.

Training delivery

Training was typically delivered to employees via brief online modules which could be accessed by workers on site or remotely, with the exception of two employers who

provided face-to-face training at the commencement-of-employment induction session. All employers ran training at induction for all staff, with most running refresher training annually or biannually. Interviewees reported that their employers have sophisticated systems for monitoring training compliance such as automated reporting and alerts to supervisors, but, beyond brief quizzes at the end of online modules, none had the means to thoroughly assess employee comprehension and engagement with the training content.

Training content

No employers conducted specific sexual harassment training; rather, training about sexual harassment was generally embedded within code-of-conduct training, which outlined organisational values and appropriate workplace behaviours: "We talk to harassment in the scope of behaviours that are acceptable to us" (Mason, specialist manager). There was variation in the degree to which employers' training programs addressed sexual harassment specifically; some training sessions included specific scenarios demonstrating sexual harassment, while in others it was subsumed in general modules on appropriate workplace behaviour and harassment.

Most interviewees noted that their business provided supervisory staff with additional online training modules, which outlined their responsibilities in relation to workplace conduct matters and how to respond to incidents in the workplace generally. Notably, one employer delivered sexual harassment-specific training to managers and supervisors biannually, which demonstrated thorough discussion of real-world case studies of behaviours which did, and did not, constitute sexual harassment. These behaviours were discussed using metaphorical language such as knowing "what's in the lane, and what's out". Supervisors were given the opportunity during training to ask questions and discuss situations they had personally encountered in the workplace.

Some interviewees noted that their business provided workers with additional "customer behaviour" training, which outlined what to do in instances where customers were acting inappropriately. The training typically

encouraged workers to “de-escalate” the situation where possible, and then to alert a manager. One employer provided workers with a three-step framework to respond to customer aggression, violence and sexual harassment. The first step outlined how to de-escalate the situation, the second how to set boundaries and consequences for the behaviour if it continued, and the third how to act to ensure the worker’s safety, which included actions such as notifying a manager, asking the customer to leave the store, or leaving the store themselves if there was a threat to their safety. The framework was introduced via an online, scenario-based customer training module and reinforced through regular communications from management and posters for a staff audience in stores.

Perceptions of sexual harassment training

Participants were asked about the effectiveness of sexual harassment training and if and how it might be improved in their organisations. On this question, many participants expressed concern about whether workers (particularly younger workers) were properly equipped to recognise “low intensity” (Nathan, specialist manager) behaviours such as inappropriate jokes or comments, leering or staring as sexual harassment:

Particularly with sexual harassment ... they don’t always realise it is what it is until afterwards.
(Bianca, specialist manager)

Several participants expressed concern about whether online training alone was sufficient to convey the nuance and complexity of sexual harassment to staff and supervisors. There was general agreement among participants that understanding the “grey areas” of sexual harassment required workers to be able to discuss situations and ask questions, which could not be achieved through online modules alone. Many perceived that face-to-face training would better enable workers to discuss complex situations, ask questions and role-play situations, ensuring that the information was properly understood by workers, and could prompt them to talk about their own real-life experiences, and that workers would feel comfortable to recognise and respond to sexual harassment when it occurred.

Face-to-face is more likely to bring out certain scenarios or certain issues or certain questions that you don’t get through an online training module.
(David, specialist manager)

I think younger staff can be more vulnerable and not know how to handle those situations and haven’t had so much of an opportunity to be adequately trained. Or even if they are trained, once you experience it, it’s a whole different scenario because panic can set in.
(Rina, employer association)

Additionally, some interviewees expressed concern that online training modules were not taken seriously by workers, who would click through them quickly and without thinking. Union official interviewees saw training as something of a “tick and flick” (Samantha, union representative) exercise which put the responsibility on the individual worker to not perpetrate sexual harassment and to respond appropriately when it occurred:

Tick-box is the way that I’d describe it [online training]. People don’t really recall it, and the only time that they ever discuss it is when they’ve either been sexually harassed, or they’ve been accused of it.
(Sophia, union representative)

For many participants, face-to-face training delivered by a skilled trainer was the preferred option. However, cost pressures were cited as a major impediment to this form of training, and online training was seen as necessary to reach a disparate workforce characterised by high rates of turnover, dispersed shifts and high levels of casual employment. Supplementing online training with in-person activities and discussion or delivering training via interactive online sessions (e.g. via Zoom or Teams) were suggested as practical alternatives to asynchronous delivery. Throughout the interviews, several specialist managers identified additional opportunities for informal discussion and awareness-raising outside of training to reinforce learnings, for example, in team huddles, monthly awareness campaigns, or “lunch and learn” sessions for office workers.

Sexual harassment complaints processes

Participants were asked to describe the steps workers could take if they witnessed or experienced sexual harassment in the workplace. All specialist managers described a similar suite of options available for workers to report incidents of sexual harassment after they had occurred. Where possible, workers were encouraged to discuss and resolve the issue directly and locally with the person involved. Employers then recommended that workers first report the incident to their direct (line or store) manager, or their manager's manager if this was not appropriate.

At all but one employer, workers had the option for the employee to contact HR (usually an HR team member or manager) with complaints if reporting to a manager was not appropriate. Most employers also had a third party-managed online platform or hotline where workers could lodge complaints about a range of issues including sexual harassment. These complaints were generally triaged by a third party and directed to members of the HR team to respond to. Several interviewees said that their organisation gave the option for complaints to be raised anonymously through these platforms. Anonymous reporting was viewed positively by union representatives and several manager interviewees who, while acknowledging that this limited the ability for investigation, felt that it may increase reporting and thus give employers a more accurate picture of sexual harassment incidents to inform remedial and preventative efforts:

I think it gives people more confidence if they can be anonymous, raise a complaint, then it's something that we can look into. (Kara, specialist manager)

Employers also offered workers employee assistance programs or third-party wellbeing support apps.

Perceptions of the sexual harassment complaints process

Supervisors were typically the first point of contact for workers to report incidents of sexual harassment, however interviewees noted several problems with this pathway. First, reporting to a direct manager was "only practical if the line manager was not involved" (David, specialist manager) and hence not an option when the harassment was perpetrated by the manager. In such instances, workers were encouraged to report to their manager's manager such as an area or regional manager. However, one interviewee manager noted that workers often perceived (sometimes incorrectly) a close relationship between managerial staff, which could dissuade them from reporting incidents to other managers for fear of not being believed. They described a worker's thought process:

If I tell my area manager and they're basically best friends with my store manager, they're not going to believe me. We hear that quite a bit.
(Melissa, specialist manager)

Additionally, high rates of staff turnover and the casualised nature of the retail workforce meant that workers may not know their managers or feel comfortable reporting to them given issues of power differential.

A union representative commented that some direct managers were "not skilled or trained to handle complaints when they come to them" (Karina), again making this pathway problematic:

We see a lot of complaints just get lost, you know, particularly when they're reported within the store. Someone will think that it's being dealt with and a month later it hasn't been progressed because the line manager or the store manager really hasn't known what to do, and it hasn't been escalated appropriately.
(Karina, union representative)

Union and industry association representatives argued that more management training targeting sexual harassment was needed, to ensure that managers were able to recognise sexual harassment and were equipped to respond to incidents appropriately.

Under-reporting of sexual harassment

Participants were asked to reflect on the potential causes of under-reporting of sexual harassment in the retail industry (AHRC, 2019). Interviewees suggested various barriers to reporting including worker fear, lack of faith in complaints processes, poor understanding of behaviours which constitute sexual harassment, and a normalisation of sexual harassment as “just part of the job”.

Worker fear

Workers’ fear that reporting sexual harassment would result in them “either losing their job or being blacklisted from the possibility of promotion” (Nathan, specialist manager) was seen as a barrier to reporting having experienced sexual harassment, particularly for younger workers or those in precarious employment.

Often in retail they’re predominantly getting [harassing] the juniors, they’re getting their first job. They want their job, they want their money, they’re trying to get their independence. They’re not going to put a complaint in, but they also don’t know where to put the complaint in or even what is sexual harassment. (Samantha, union representative)

Participants noted that workers’ fear of retribution could also prevent reporting, particularly if the perpetrator was a colleague. In these instances, reporting harassment could threaten the close collegial relationships that often existed among retail workers, “put[ting] at risk that entire friendship network” (Melissa, specialist manager).

I think it’s the fear of what could happen. Am I going to make this person angry? They were my friend. (Amara, specialist manager)

To overcome this, union representatives emphasised the need for workers to better understand the complaints resolution processes, and for the process to take into account the needs and preferences of the complainant where possible (i.e. be complainant-led). Educating workers that reporting would not always (or necessarily) result in termination of employment for the perpetrator was also seen as important by interviewees.

A lot of people when they’re making a decision about making a complaint, they want to know what that’s going to involve, and what that process will look like. So, you know, transparency built into that we think is really important. Also, things like, how will it be handled? If I’m the complainant, will I be spoken to about what the outcomes should look like? ... Will I be told the outcome at the end, and the action taken? (Karina, union representative)

Making sure that team members understand that they can raise it and we can help facilitate that conversation and you’re not going to get anyone fired just because you’ve got our assistance in helping navigate that conversation. I think potentially awareness around that as well. (Evelyn, specialist manager)

Lack of faith in the complaints process

Some participants felt that workers may be reluctant to report because they lacked faith in the complaints process, believing that if they were to report, their complaint wouldn’t be taken seriously, acted on appropriately or result in an outcome that is acceptable to them. This could result from confidentiality requirements which meant complainants were not told the outcome of their report or past experiences of their own or colleagues’ complaints not resulting in an outcome.

Whilst these circumstances are often confidential in nature, often more people in stores know about things going on than they realise, and they will also know if complaints have been looked at and nothing happens to perpetrators. And that creates a real disincentive for people who want to make a complaint, so employers have to get better at all elements of this. Setting up the right processes but following through as well. (Karina, union representative)

While providing a more transparent outline of the process and potential outcomes of complaints was seen by union representatives as necessary to promote faith in the reporting process, it was seen as an “ideal world” scenario by one specialist manager (Rachel, specialist manager).

Normalisation of sexual harassment

Interviewees were almost unanimous in noting that while behaviours such as suggestive comments and jokes were common in retail, they were rarely reported as sexual harassment. In contrast, sexual harassment that was physical in nature or which was repeated was more likely to be reported. They suggested that this may be because workers did not recognise these “low intensity” (Nathan, specialist manager) or “low-level” (Rachel, specialist manager) behaviours as sexual harassment or feel they were worthy of reporting. To overcome this, participants felt more education covering “that fine line around what sexual harassment is, what it isn’t, and how quickly it can turn” (Kara, specialist manager) was needed.

There’s a lot of sexualised comments and stuff like that, that I’ve observed. And probably most of those things don’t get reported because people don’t realise that they’re low-level or early-stage behaviour, but I guess physical conduct is more likely to be reported.
(Rachel, specialist manager)

I’m sure there’s a portion of people who go, “Oh, well, maybe I’m just being sensitive, it’s just a joke”, and not validating that their feelings are okay and it’s worth them actually speaking up as well, I would guess.
(Evelyn, specialist manager)

Behaviours perpetrated by customers were also seen as being less likely to be reported for several reasons according to interviewees. Interviewees felt that workers may see limited possibility for disciplinary action of customers unknown to their organisation, meaning they “don’t bother” (Jordan, specialist manager) reporting these incidents. Additionally, the strong customer service ethos in retail and deeply ingrained notions of customer sovereignty meant that inappropriate behaviour was more readily accepted by workers:

I think it can go with the territory unfortunately ... Because we are trained, within the industries, “the customer is always right”. (Alex, employer association)

Sexual harassment data collection, analysis and reporting

Participants were asked about their organisation’s processes for collecting, analysing and reporting data relating to sexual harassment in their organisation.

Collection and analysis of sexual harassment data

There was variation in the way data on sexual harassment incidents were collected by employers and their ability to analyse this data and identify sexual harassment trends in their workplaces. Some employers had sophisticated systems for data capture, which could be used to identify and report on sexual harassment trends including the number of reports made by area, store location or worker demographic group, and changes over time. However, most interviewees commented that data collection and analysis processes in their organisation were rudimentary or could be improved. In some organisations, sexual harassment incidents were noted in case files which could only be searched individually, making reporting overall numbers and trends a manual and arduous process or not possible. In organisations where different sexual harassment incidents were dealt with differently, depending on whether the perpetrator was a co-worker or customer, incidents were logged in separate systems and the data for each were collected, analysed and reported separately and often to different senior managers. Good data outputs were also dependent on staff (often supervisors) inputting data into their respective systems in a timely fashion, thoroughly and accurately. Some employers did not require supervisors to log incidents of sexual harassment if they were resolved internally, limiting the data available for analysis and reporting:

The limiting factor is it’s not mandatory to report sexual harassment as a line manager at the moment ... If the line manager feels confident to deal with the report of sexual harassment themselves, there’s no need for them to raise a P&C [people and culture] case, in which case we don’t gather the data.
(Rachel, specialist manager)

Good data collection, analysis and reporting was, however, deemed to be valuable to inform practice change and justify increased resourcing to improve sexual harassment prevention. For example, data showing a rise in young people reporting sexual harassment prompted one specialist manager to investigate how training and communications could more effectively target this group:

Recently we noticed a slight increase in cases where the reporter was young, and we have recently focused on how to tailor our training and communications to young people specifically and which channels we can use to reach them most effectively. (Jordan, specialist manager)

Many participants argued that data collection, analysis and reporting processes in retail organisations would need to improve to meet newly legislated preventative duties under the *Anti-Discrimination and Human Rights Legislation Amendment (Respect at Work) Act 2022* (Cth) and changing work health and safety reporting requirements. Some interviewees noted that the process of making improvements was already under way, with one union representative commenting that this was the case for many employers who were “building up their capabilities now” (Karina, union representative).

Reporting of sexual harassment data

Sexual harassment incidents were typically reported to senior management on a case-by-case basis, for example, if they could not be remedied at the store level. Some organisations routinely reported sexual harassment data to members of senior leadership, although one interviewee noted that in their organisation only cases which resulted in formal investigations (rather than total sexual harassment cases) were routinely reported to the board, significantly reducing the number of cases and seemingly the scale of the problem.

An exceptional case was one interviewee who described a unique practice in their organisation, whereby a quarterly meeting was held with members of senior leadership. During this meeting, a report which outlines insights and recommendations based on identified trends relating to

sexual harassment, bullying and discrimination in the organisation was presented and discussed. Each meeting, a regional or area manager would present a pre-selected “real world” sexual harassment case (Melissa) and be asked questions about this, thus functioning as “an accountability piece” (Melissa) and learning opportunity for the employer:

They are answering to their actions and their response, but it’s also about understanding what it’s like at the frontline, what could be done differently, what we could do better as a function but also as a brand and out in stores. (Melissa, specialist manager)

Preventing sexual harassment

As has been discussed, most interviewees described their organisation’s policies and processes as focused on responding to sexual harassment *after* it had occurred. When asked about *preventative* action interviewees described some efforts focused on policies and training, improving gender equality in the workplace, conducting sexual harassment risk assessments, and industry-led customer education campaigns and security measures.

Increasing gender equality

Currently the retail industry is highly gender segregated, with women disproportionately represented in frontline positions and men in management (WGEA, 2022b). Remedying this gendered power imbalance in the retail industry was seen by one participant as “the silver bullet” (Alex, employer association) in sexual harassment prevention, and something two retail employers noted they were currently working towards:

We have significant gender equity work which has been underway for many years that aims to increase women in leadership, close the pay gap and create greater voice and safety for women at work. While not specifically a measure for preventing sexual harassment, this work is deeply connected to the topic and something we assess in this light. (Jordan, specialist manager)

Involving senior leadership

Most participants saw the need for greater engagement on sexual harassment from senior leadership and management staff to drive prevention. Participants felt that regular communication from senior leadership about sexual harassment was needed to shift the workplace culture surrounding sexual harassment and increase workers' understanding of these issues and confidence to report incidents when they occur. While participants felt that direct managers openly speaking about these issues would have a particularly strong influence on workers, messaging from all levels of leadership (described by one participant as “a cascade approach”; Rachel, specialist manager) was needed.

Leadership and sharing stories helps to give them the confidence. It just makes it all more credible as well, the whole system. (Bianca, specialist manager)

We need a cascade approach where operationally these things are discussed in the weekly communications from the CEO, and they're talked about by the state managers and they're talked about by the regional managers, so this behaviour is not okay. (Rachel, specialist manager)

However, some participants perceived senior leadership involvement as sporadic and occurring only when issues that posed significant organisational risk arose:

The interest piques when there is an issue, of course. (David, specialist manager)

I think the boards generally, they're only interested in two things, governance and risk. So, they're only interested in impact. This will be really direct, the majority of board members are worried about having a look if they have a sense there's a problem. (Alex, employer association)

Conducting risk assessments

Some employers conducted risk assessments to identify workplace risk factors for sexual harassment and how to address them to prevent future risk, either proactively or after incidents of sexual harassment were reported. One union representative commented that while risk assessments are valuable and needed, they were uncommon among retail employers who largely addressed sexual harassment complaints on a case-by-case basis:

In our view, if there's a case of sexual harassment that's happened, that should trigger a company to go out and conduct a risk assessment. That's not happening. What tends to be happening at the moment is that they'll get a sexual harassment complaint, it will be sent off to whoever it is within the company who does the investigations, it will be dealt with as an individual complaint they don't think about. (Karina, union representative)

Developing industry-led customer education campaigns

Interviewees argued that customer-perpetrated sexual harassment stemmed from societal ideas and norms in relation to retail work and workers as low-skilled, low-paid and low value. Such attitudes, they argued, fostered disrespectful behaviour, and there was consensus that this was an issue which needed to be addressed at the industry or society level rather than being the responsibility of individual employers, who were perceived as having limited scope to change customer behaviour. Several manager interviewees suggested that industry-led customer education campaigns akin to the Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees' Association's “No One Deserves A Serve” (SDA, n.d.) campaign could help to increase customer awareness of and accountability for sexual harassment and other forms of abuse, and to help shift societal perceptions of retail work:

How do you train society that that behaviour is inappropriate? (Freya, specialist manager)

[We need] better campaigns to educate the public and shift behaviour of the public towards retail employees, create greater awareness and accountability for people being decent to retail workers. We can do a lot to manage those who work for us, but we have little control over customers and members of the public who come into our sites. During COVID some state governments increased penalties for spitting on retail workers. We need a similar approach for sexual harassment and harassment of retail workers ... a clear message that it's unacceptable and has consequences. (Jordan, specialist manager)

Implementing security measures

In an effort to prevent customer-perpetrated harassment and ensure staff safety in the event that this occurred, some employers had security measures such as CCTV cameras, in-store security personnel, duress buttons or code words which staff could use to alert other team members or external security when they needed help. One participant noted that while security personnel were available to stores located in major shopping centres, there was variation in the quality of support they provided to staff and the scope of their role.

Rostering to ensure employees work with others and are not alone in a store was seen as a key preventative strategy, but one which, particularly in smaller, low-traffic stores, was not always financially viable.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented the findings from Phase 2 of our research, which involved conducting key informant interviews to explore the measures implemented by retail specialist managers to prevent and address sexual harassment in their workplaces. We gained insights into the occurrence and characteristics of sexual harassment within organisations, identified factors that contribute to an increased risk of harassment for workers, examined the perpetrators involved, assessed organisational policies related to prevention and response, evaluated the content and delivery methods of sexual harassment training programs, studied reporting procedures for targets and bystanders, uncovered potential causes of under-reporting, examined preventative actions, and investigated organisational processes for data collection, analysis and reporting. The interview data has provided valuable insights into current practices within organisations and has highlighted potential avenues for improvement in preventing and addressing sexual harassment within the retail industry. These insights from key informant interviews were used to inform the questions asked during Phase 3 of the project in the focus groups conducted with retail workers and managers.

CHAPTER 6

Workers' and managers' experiences of workplace sexual harassment and their impacts

To enhance our understanding of the experiences and consequences of sexual harassment for retail workers and to develop worker-centric strategies for prevention and resolution, we held 12 online focus groups. These focus groups included a diverse range of participants, consisting of 56 retail workers and managers from various sub-sectors in the retail industry. By engaging directly with these individuals, we aimed to gain valuable insights into their first-hand experiences and perspectives. This qualitative approach allowed us to gather in-depth information and develop targeted strategies that prioritise the wellbeing and empowerment of retail workers in addressing the issue of sexual harassment.

This chapter presents findings on the ways in which retail workers and managers understand and experience sexual harassment, the impact of such events on working and broader lives, and how organisational and industry-wide factors shape those experiences. We show that workplace sexual harassment is pervasive in the retail industry, and it presents profound, harmful consequences for retail workers and managers.

Workers' understanding of sexual harassment

At the beginning of each focus group, workers were asked to explain what they understood of the concept of sexual harassment, including how they defined sexual harassment and what behaviours constituted sexual harassment. Across every focus group, participants demonstrated a detailed and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon. Participants were able to articulate a wide range of behaviours which may constitute sexual

harassment. Participants noted that sexual harassment “could be a range of things, with sexual intent” (Neil, 31, fashion manager) and gave examples such as inappropriate comments, jokes and innuendo; intrusive questions about workers' personal lives or physical appearance; unwanted advances (made in person or via technology); staring or leering; and physical behaviours such as touching, hugging, and attempted or actual sexual assault. They emphasised that sexual harassment behaviours were “unwanted” (Ashley, 20, fashion worker; Serena, 24, fashion manager; Leonardo, 18, supermarket worker) or “unwelcome” (Evan, 22, fashion worker) by the target and non-consensual: “anything that's unwanted in a sexual manner” (Ashley, 20, fashion worker).

Participants understood that such behaviours could constitute sexual harassment whether they were repeated behaviours or one-off events. They also knew that such behaviours could be considered workplace sexual harassment if they were perpetrated by anyone that they interacted with in their work environment, for example customers, colleagues, management or senior leadership staff, and other third parties such as security personnel, suppliers or couriers. While some participants understood that behaviours which in some way related to their work but occurred outside of their standard workplaces and working hours, such as at work functions or via digital technology, constituted workplace sexual harassment, others acknowledged that such instances fell into a “grey area” (Shahid, 25, fashion worker; Kieran, 31, manager⁸; Julian, 25, intimate apparel worker) and it could be more difficult to say with certainty that these behaviours constituted sexual harassment.

⁸Sector not identified.

Many of the women participants in focus groups talked about how they understood sexual harassment as a feeling of generalised discomfort or unease which could arise from certain interactions with a sexualised undertone. One fashion retail worker said: “You get that really uncomfortable feeling and you know that you’re going into this unwanted territory” (Ashley, 20, fashion worker). Workers discussed how behavioural subtleties such as eye contact, body language, and the tone in which things were said could mean that even interactions which were not overtly sexual in nature could constitute sexual harassment, as is exemplified in the quotes below:

The eye contact you get from certain people, their body language ... the way they’re looking at you is in a sexual sort of way. (Natasha, 22, fashion worker)

It’s kind of a subtle thing. Just that uncomfortable ... the way people, especially men obviously, look at you. It just creeps you out a bit. (Sabrina, 40, supermarket worker)

A number of men and women participants discussed the way in which sexual harassment constituted a nebulous “grey area” (Shahid, 25, fashion worker) or “grey line” (Donovan, 24, fashion worker), and that behaviours considered as clearly sexual harassment to some people may not be considered so by others: “What I might be comfortable with, someone else may find really uncomfortable” (Roland, 35, worker). For these reasons, some workers perceived that a “hard and fast” (Ashley, 20, fashion worker), “dot points” (Angela, 24, fashion worker) definition of sexual harassment could not, in and of itself, capture the more subtle forms of sexual harassment that workers regularly experienced and the nuances associated with individual experiences, orientations and context, as one fashion retail worker described:

It’s so much more nuanced than that. I don’t know if a textbook definition can cover everyone’s personal experience of it. (Angela, 24, fashion worker)

Dimensions of sexual harassment and risk factors

Workers were asked to explain their perception of the incidence of sexual harassment in their workplaces, who they had observed as being the common perpetrators, who they saw as the typical targets of sexual harassment in their workplaces, and the factors that might put workers at higher risk of experiencing sexual harassment.

Dimensions of sexual harassment and risk factors

Incidence

A majority of focus group participants reported that sexual harassment was an extremely common occurrence in retail workplaces. They attributed this, in part, to the “sheer volume of interactions” (Gaurav, 24, supermarket worker) that retail workers had with large numbers of customers and colleagues in large workplaces, which they perceived made sexual harassment more likely:

When you have that many interactions, it’s bound to happen more often, unfortunately. (Gaurav, 24, supermarket worker)

Participants reported that verbal forms of harassment such as inappropriate comments, jokes and innuendo; unwanted advances; and intrusive questions about private lives were a very common part of their daily working lives, occurring “day in, day out” (Oliver, 33, supermarket worker). Physical touching and attempts at physical contact, on the other hand, had been experienced or observed by some participants but were less common than verbal and other related experiences. There were variations in the discussion of these experiences, and we noted clear gender differences. For example, while men perceived sexual harassment to be “common” (Leonardo, 18, supermarket worker) or “fairly common” (Gaurav, 24, supermarket worker; Kieran, 31, manager) in their workplaces, during their focus group discussions they did not describe personally experiencing or witnessing these incidents at the same frequency as women workers.

Perpetrators of sexual harassment

Participants were near universal in reporting that men were the most common perpetrators of workplace sexual harassment, whether they were peers, supervisors or managers, or customers. They commented that male perpetrators were generally “older” (Natalie, 30, fashion worker; Angela, 24, fashion worker; Claire, 24, fashion worker) or “middle-aged” (Celine, 20, supermarket manager), and that there was often a significant age difference between the male perpetrator and their typically younger female target, as summarised in one fashion retail manager’s observation:

Generally, it’ll be a male and a younger woman. There’ll be a bit of an age gap I’ve seen. I guess in instances of, like, a power imbalance. Yeah.
(Serena, 24, fashion manager)

While focus group participants acknowledged that sexual harassment certainly could be (and had been observed as) perpetrated by women, this was seen to be rare. Notably, participants who were part of a focus group consisting only of intimate apparel store workers discussed personal experiences of women customers making “casual comments” (Eliza, 27, intimate apparel worker) about their bodies or chests and being “touchy” (Adeline, 25, intimate apparel worker) – behaviours which they viewed as sexual harassment while believing the perpetrators would be oblivious that their behaviour was having this impact or think instead that they were being complementary to retail staff. This is exemplified in one intimate apparel store manager’s comment:

Sometimes women will comment on your body, even if it’s saying something nice, they’ll be like, “Oh my god, I wish I had boobs as big as yours. Your boobs are amazing” ... it’s just like, you’re still commenting on my body. That’s uncomfortable.
(Delilah, 19, intimate apparel store manager)

Focus group discussions identified that sexual harassment was often perpetrated by colleagues and supervisors or more senior managers. Participants who worked in feminised teams in frontline fashion retail and intimate apparel retail said they had limited or no experience of harassment perpetrated by colleagues. In their case,

harassment was predominantly perpetrated by customers or managers. For others, the nature of the harassment perpetrated by colleagues and managers varied widely, ranging from inappropriate comments and innuendo; to repeated and unwanted advances in person or via technology, such as social media or work platforms; to unwanted physical behaviours such as hugging and touching. Participants discussed the difficulties workers faced when attempting to navigate harassment perpetrated by people they worked with daily. They commented that the close collegial relationships between workers meant that verbal harassment could potentially be interpreted “as a joke” (Claire, 24, fashion worker), or brushed off as one by the perpetrator, making it more difficult for the target to raise a concern. For example, one participant employed in fashion retail commented:

If you do kind of bring it up, they [co-workers] so easily just put it off as a joke. “I didn’t mean it” or “Why can’t you take the joke.” (Leah, 22, fashion worker)

Additionally, frequent contact between workers meant that this type of harassment was more likely to be a repeated rather than a one-off occurrence, which one participant employed in fashion retail noted could escalate over time “until it gets to a level where it’s obviously not okay” (Bethany, 22, fashion worker).

Participants acknowledged the “power imbalance” (Angela, 24, fashion worker; Serena, 24, fashion manager) between managers and workers as enabling sexual harassment to occur, with one male participant describing manager-perpetrated harassment as “a bit of a power play” (Donovan, 24, fashion worker) in which male managers leveraged their positions to harass younger women in their teams. Many participants discussed how this imbalance of power, coupled with the fact that managers often controlled workers’ access to and pattern of shifts, could make it difficult or seemingly impossible for workers to report these incidents as they believed it may jeopardise their earnings and employment security. Several women participants recounted experiencing these barriers, often as younger workers, as exemplified in one participant’s quote about a previous retail workplace:

All of the people above me were men and I was pretty young as well, so it took me a while to feel like I could say anything or stand up for myself because of the power imbalance and I was worried I'd lose my job. (Angela, 24, fashion worker)

Organisational policies that favoured managers as the first line of contact for workers to report sexual harassment, and some workers' lack of awareness of alternatives, were additional barriers to reporting manager-perpetrated harassment. These are discussed in more detail in Chapter 7.

Customer-perpetrated harassment emerged as a key concern for workers across all industry segments and comprised the majority of the harassment experienced by focus group participants. This was especially the case for those working in fashion retail and intimate apparel segments of the industry whose colleagues were mostly women. In stores which sold exclusively women's apparel, participants noted that perpetrators were typically men accompanying their partner or shopping alone for their partner. The nature of the sexual harassment perpetrated by customers varied, however unwanted comments, jokes, innuendo, verbal advancements, staring and leering were most commonly reported. Some participants experienced customer-perpetrated harassment as "one-off" (Bethany, 22, fashion worker) incidents and experiences that they labelled as "a bit more temporary" (Bethany, 22, fashion worker) than harassment perpetrated by a colleague or manager. However, several participants employed at large supermarkets spoke about "regulars" (Sabrina, 40, supermarket worker) known to and avoided by workers due to their consistently inappropriate comments or behaviours. One participant employed in a large supermarket commented:

We've got a few regular customers where I walk the other way because it's like I cannot deal with them. I do not want to look at them. (Sabrina, 40, supermarket worker)

Participants discussed how expectations of customer service (which required politeness, friendliness and deference to customers), and notions of customer sovereignty ("the mentality that the customer's always right"; Angela, 24, fashion worker), which they saw as being deeply ingrained in retail work both enabled

customer-perpetrated harassment and made staff feel as though they had to put up with it. One fashion retail worker described being "trapped into that interaction":

They'll [the customer will] say something that's just gross, and you know that if I was in the street or the supermarket, you wouldn't walk up to me and say that, but you'll walk up to me on the basis that you can ... You're banking on the fact that I can't be like, "That's gross, get away from me." I have to be like, "Oh, do you want a receipt?" It traps you into that interaction. (Sydney, 19, fashion worker)

Many participants recounted experiences of making a complaint about customer-perpetrated harassment (most commonly by speaking to a direct manager) and their complaint not being taken seriously, not being acted upon, or resulting in outcomes which they perceived to be ineffective in preventing further harassment. This further reinforced their perception that they needed to accept customer-perpetrated harassment and were powerless to act effectively upon it. Many participants also perceived that, as customers were generally unknown to stores and often only visited once, disciplinary or other action was difficult or impossible and thus there was "no point in reporting" (Julian, 26, intimate apparel store worker) these incidents. Participants also noted that bans on regular "problem customers" were often not enacted or actioned and, when they were, they were difficult to enforce or proved ineffective at preventing future harassment. Finally, some focus group participants recalled incidents of sexual harassment perpetrated by "third parties" (that is, not staff or customers) such as couriers, security or building contractors. These interactions were far less common than the harassment experienced from customers, colleagues or managers.

Targets

Focus group participants were asked whether they perceived that certain groups (e.g. based on age, gender, sexual orientation, cultural status) were more likely than others to experience sexual harassment in the workplace. Workers uniformly identified women and younger workers as being most at risk of experiencing the behaviour.

Women

Women were widely perceived to be the primary targets of sexual harassment in retail workplaces. Among participants, women were more likely than men to report having themselves experienced sexual harassment as opposed to observing such behaviours or hearing about them from others. In our pre-focus group survey, 86 per cent (24 out of 28) of women workers compared to 55 per cent (6 out of 11) of men workers and 70 per cent (7 out of 10) of women managers and 60 per cent (3 out of 5) of men managers reported personally experiencing sexual harassment. Indeed, many women in the focus groups commented that their own personal experiences of sexual harassment, particularly verbal harassment such as jokes, comments and innuendo, were so frequent and pervasive that they had become an expected and routine “part of the job” (Vanessa, 27, fashion worker) or “part of the day” (Celeste, 31, intimate apparel store worker):

It’s so regular that it’s just part of the day. And it comes with the job now, you just expect it to happen, because it happens so often.

(Celeste, 31, intimate apparel store worker)

We’re just subject to it so regularly, that it’s like water off a duck’s back ... It’s just another day in retail.

(Harper, 33, intimate apparel store worker)

A sense of camaraderie between women based on their shared experiences of sexual harassment was evident throughout the focus group discussions, demonstrating the pervasive nature of these experiences. Participants described the way in which discussing or joking about their experiences with colleagues acted as an informal coping mechanism for workers who, for various reasons, felt unable to or chose not to report, exemplified in one participant’s comment: “We almost have to laugh about it. If you don’t laugh, you’ll cry” (Eliza, 27, intimate apparel store worker). This sense of camaraderie extended to women managers as well who also experienced this. For example, one manager of a small, independent store described how she and other young workers would bond over their shared experiences of being physically harassed by their boss and store owner:

I would see it happen to my co-workers, and they’d see it happen to me. And we’d just look at each other and go, “It happened again.” And once he left, it would just be like, “I can’t believe he’s still doing this” ... And they weren’t telling me because I was their manager, they were telling me because they knew it was happening to me too. And it was, “We have to tell each other, because there’s no one else in that world that’s going to listen to us.” (Kylie, 24, independent retail manager)

Younger workers

Participants reported that young workers were at particularly high risk of experiencing sexual harassment and were ill-equipped to handle such incidents when they occurred or were reluctant to report them. Many participants described having personally experienced sexual harassment as a younger worker in retail, having witnessed younger colleagues experiencing sexual harassment in their workplaces, or having been approached by younger colleagues about these experiences. Many of the experiences recounted by participants involved colleagues under the age of 18, who were more frequently targeted by male customers, colleagues and management staff. One supermarket duty manager reported younger workers to be frequent targets of customer-perpetrated harassment due to a perception that they were unable to react in these instances:

I find a lot of the male customers tend to go after younger female retail workers because of the societal expectations and professional expectations that, “Oh, if I say something to her, she can’t do anything. She just has to smile and take it.”

(Ava, 30, supermarket manager)

Another participant commented that, while working at a large supermarket, younger workers (commonly minors) were most frequently targeted:

In my old workplace ... when coming from managers, it was definitely the younger staff members, including myself when I was below 18, that were probably the ones who were receiving it the most.

(Bethany, 22, fashion worker)

Two participants reported that, as underage workers, they had been encouraged by their managers to “flirt with customers” (Natalie, 30, fashion worker) or “shake your thighs at customers” (Sydney, 19, fashion worker) to generate sales. One fashion retail worker described experiencing this as a 17-year-old worker:

[The manager] pulled me aside and was telling me that I’m very sexy, that I should be out trying to flirt with the gentlemen ... He’s a 50-year-old man saying how sexy I was, and I should wear more makeup and flirt with the men to ... get more sales.
(Natalie, 30, fashion worker)

Participants who had personally experienced sexual harassment as younger workers commented that, at the time, they were unable to articulate that these behaviours were harassment: “Being younger, you don’t recognise what sexual harassment actually is” (Natasha, 22, fashion worker). Other participants perceived that younger workers’ limited workplace experience meant that they “don’t actually know whether it’s sexual harassment or not” (Jemma, 38, fashion manager), were “not able to recognise that they’re in a potentially dangerous situation” (Celeste, 31, intimate apparel store worker), or assumed that because they were in a customer service role that those behaviours were acceptable.

Managers similarly identified younger workers as a group particularly at risk, and some described proactively watching out for them in their workplaces and providing them with extra, informal training. They did this to ensure that younger workers understood what sexual harassment was, what to do about if it did occur, and to emphasise to workers that they did not have to accept those behaviours as a part of their job. Some managers’ actions to protect younger staff members were motivated by their own personal experiences of sexual harassment as younger workers in retail, as demonstrated in this intimate apparel store manager’s quote:

As someone who has experienced sexual harassment in the workplace ... it’s so important for me that no one else is in the position where I was at 17, that I didn’t feel like I could tell anyone and that it would just be fobbed off. (Delilah, 19, intimate apparel store manager)

Others described a sense of obligation that came from them being older and having more industry experience. One service supervisor at a big-box store reflected on the emotional labour she performed educating, and in her words, “protecting” younger and more inexperienced staff she managed:

You’re sort of a mother hen in this situation, because you’re older, you’ve worked in retail longer. You try to explain to them “It’s not okay. You’re allowed to walk away. You don’t have to put up with it.”
(Luna, 49, big-box store manager)

Another assistant manager at a supermarket echoed the sense of obligation managers felt to protect younger team managers:

It’s just that extra level of, “No, I’m older than you, I’m going to protect you. You never have to feel like this.”
(Lisa, 36, supermarket manager)

Sexual orientation

Focus group participants perceived that gay men were more likely to experience sexual harassment in retail workplaces than were other men. In such cases, women were often identified by focus group participants as perpetrators. For example, some workers recalled experiencing or witnessing situations where women had acted inappropriately towards workers who identified as gay, assuming that because of the men’s sexuality these behaviours were acceptable. One male manager who identified as gay working in fashion retail described:

They [women] feel that because the gay man isn’t necessarily attracted to them physically, it then permits or gives them the right to be a little more touchy feely with them or say things that they probably wouldn’t say to a heterosexual male. (Neil, 31, fashion manager)

However, focus group participants also discussed how these behaviours were perpetrated by other men. For example, one supermarket manager described his experience of being physically harassed by a colleague in a previous workplace due to his status as an openly gay man:

I worked with a baker once that, obviously I'm gay, he knew I was gay, and he just came up one day and grabbed me in the crotch and said, "Oh, I bet you like this, don't you? It turns you on."

(Peter, 34, supermarket manager)

Risk factors for sexual harassment

Across the 12 focus groups, participants identified several factors relating to the work environment which they felt put workers at increased risk of experiencing sexual harassment. These included working in isolation in small teams or with limited supervision, selling sexualised products, and some uniform and makeup requirements managers placed on workers.

Working in isolation, in small teams or with limited supervision

Focus group participants discussed that working alone, with few colleagues, or without adequate levels of supervision both increased workers' risk of experiencing sexual harassment and made them feel vulnerable, unsafe and less able to respond should incidents occur. Night or "closing" shifts were a particular concern for workers as these were usually "very understaffed" (Celine, 20, supermarket manager), for example with only one to two workers and no management staff rostered on:

It is very understaffed, particularly at nighttime and it is a really common occurrence to just have one or two people on at nighttime in the whole store, which is really dangerous. (Angelica, 40, supermarket worker)

Workers and managers reported that they perceived this work environment to be "intimidating" (Celine, 20, supermarket manager) and that they felt that they had "no help" (Angelica, 40, supermarket worker) or "no one to call" (Sabrina, 40, supermarket worker) in troubling situations, as one supermarket worker explained:

I work a few nights and there's not a lot of us in the store. If something was to happen, you've got no one to call. You've got a 15- or 17-year-old kid in the deli department. What are they going to do? (Sabrina, 40, supermarket worker)

Workers reported having to leave workplaces alone and often in the dark after afternoon and evening shifts, which they perceived as an additional risk to their safety. For supermarket workers, click-and-collect services which required workers to take groceries to customers' cars alone (sometimes at night) were seen as particularly challenging. One participant who worked for a large supermarket recounted how, in the absence of other workers to undertake this role at night, 16-year-old workers would deliver orders to shoppers' cars "in this weird, secluded location where's there's literally no lights except for the person whose car you're delivering to" (Alice, 31, supermarket worker). This participant argued that delivering orders to strangers at any time of day and for workers of any age was "extremely scary" (Alice, 31, supermarket worker) and unsafe, and questioned why employers allowed this to occur:

During the day that's still not great by yourself. But at night, it's even worse. I don't understand why that's actually done. Why are people sent out by themselves? ... It's not safe. (Alice, 31, supermarket worker)

A common theme discussed in focus groups was that workers should not be expected to work with minimal staff or "alone and in that vulnerable position" (Bridget, 27, intimate apparel store manager) and there was a suggestion that multiple team members including supervisory staff should be available and rostered on at all times to ensure workers felt safe and had "another person there for support and safety" (Bridget, 27, intimate apparel store manager) if incidents occurred. Others commented that more protections such as increased security staff or even police presence should be implemented, for example in their stores or shopping centres during high-risk periods, or to accompany supermarket workers delivering orders to customers' cars.

Focus group participants who worked in fashion and intimate apparel segments of the industry identified retail fitting rooms as a particularly risky setting in retail workplaces because they lacked surveillance, were often

attended by a single worker, and provided opportunities for customers to indecently expose themselves to staff. Several participants recounted personal experiences where customers had indecently exposed themselves in these settings, for example “leaving the fitting room door wide open and just getting changed with the door open” (Bridget, 27, intimate apparel store manager). While some of these incidents were attributed to “a lack of self-awareness” (Celeste, 31, intimate apparel store worker) on the customer’s part, they were nonetheless uncomfortable for the workers who experienced them.

Nature of the product

Workers who sold sexualised products, including adult items or intimate apparel, perceived that the nature of the products they sold increased their risk of experiencing customer-perpetrated harassment. Intimate apparel store workers discussed how their retail environments provided customers with opportunities to make inappropriate comments, jokes and innuendo, or to stare at or remark on workers’ bodies:

The amount of male customers that I’ve had come in, looking for their partners, and my job is to ask “What size is she?” ... And it’s that look down at me, look up, look down, “Oh, she’s your size.” (Celeste, 31, intimate apparel store worker)

They also perceived such behaviours to be seen by customers as permissible or even acceptable in their retail environments, but not elsewhere: “They [customers] think just because you work in an intimate place that makes it okay” (Delilah, 19, intimate apparel store manager). Some intimate apparel store workers discussed how their employers’ in-store marketing campaigns, which sexualised the products, further enabled this harassment:

The advertising and the campaigns they make don’t help us either, because they can be quite sexualised ... When they [customers] do come into the store, you have all these signs around, you have all these slogans, and we’re in the centre of it. (Celeste, 31, intimate apparel store worker)

While the majority of harassment relating to the products being sold was reported by intimate apparel workers in our group discussions, it is important to note that other retail environments which are not overtly intimate in nature, such as supermarkets, can also stock sexualised products and thus put workers at risk. One supermarket worker recounted her colleague receiving inappropriate comments from a male customer while restocking the medicine aisle:

We were filling in the medicine aisle and she was filling around the condoms, and a middle-aged man came to her and said, “Do you have a larger size for this? Because I don’t think mine will fit any of these sizes.” Then she approached me because she didn’t know what to say. (Tina, 40, supermarket worker)

Uniform requirements

Some focus group participants described how their work uniform rendered them more vulnerable to customer-perpetrated harassment. Women participants commented that wearing tight, low-cut or revealing clothing increased workers’ risk of experiencing sexual harassment and meant that they were “most likely to be the target” (Nisha, 30, intimate apparel store worker) of inappropriate comments and looks from male customers. One participant working in an activewear store commented that the requirement to wear the store’s product (which she described as being either “super tight” or “really short”; Natasha, 22, fashion worker) meant that she often got inappropriate comments or looks from men that were unavoidable:

Especially when girls [primary customers] come in with their partners, you do get looks from them [the partners] ... and you can’t escape it because that’s just the nature of your uniform. You’re a bit stuck in what you can do. (Natasha, 22, fashion worker)

Some participants described deliberately modifying their appearance, for example wearing baggy clothing or not wearing makeup at work, in an attempt to prevent these experiences. One supermarket worker described

how, in response to the ongoing sexual harassment she experienced as a younger retail worker, she stopped wearing makeup to work to “make myself less attractive, less noticeable” (Cassandra, 27, supermarket worker). She described her thought process at the time:

Originally, I was wearing makeup to work because all the other girls were ... But it [the harassment] got so bad that I literally thought, “Okay, I’ll just stop wearing makeup. Then maybe I’ll look ugly.” But that didn’t fix the situation. I stopped wearing makeup and the same guy still was harassing me.
(Cassandra, 27, supermarket worker)

Employer-mandated wearing of name badges was another risk factor identified by participants. For example, several workers commented that wearing name badges enabled customers to search for them online, providing an opportunity for stalking and harassment on social media which some participants reported experiencing. Some women workers perceived that name badges gave customers an excuse to look at their chests: “They [customers] just use it as an excuse. They pretend they’re looking at our badges when they’re not” (Angelica, 40, supermarket worker).

Impacts of sexual harassment on workers

Workers were asked to describe the impact of workplace sexual harassment on their work and lives. Workers and managers alike described the profound impacts that experiencing any form of sexual harassment could have on their mental health and wellbeing. Participants commonly reported feeling “anxious” (Jasmine, 22, supermarket manager), “uncomfortable” (Christina, 18, fashion worker), “afraid” (Celine, 20, supermarket manager) and “scared to go to work” (Caroline, 24, fashion worker) after experiencing or witnessing sexual harassment in their workplaces. Some described a feeling of severe anxiety that would build up in anticipation of their shifts and the harassment they may potentially experience

there. It also made participants reluctant to attend their shifts, as exemplified by a fashion retail worker who had experienced sexual harassment from a senior member of management staff in her workplace:

You’d always know when you were getting that store visit from them, you wouldn’t want to work that shift basically ... you just feel disgusting after the shift. So it really would make you not want to come in if you knew that certain person was doing their visit. And that was something that everybody knew and felt, but nobody said anything until after the fact.
(Vanessa, 27, fashion worker)

Many focus group participants reported feeling unsafe in their workplaces after personally experiencing, witnessing or hearing about sexual harassment that had occurred, and some described having their “guard up” (Vanessa, 27, fashion worker) and being “more cautious” (Claire, 24, fashion worker) of the way they behaved and interacted with customers, colleagues or managers at work in an attempt to avoid harassment. For example, the same fashion retail worker commented that she would dress more conservatively and “be a bit toey around the way that I moved in the store” (Vanessa, 27, fashion worker) when the “problem” manager was working or new male leadership came through.

Some participants reported that personally witnessing or experiencing sexual harassment in their workplaces had motivated their past job choices, such as refusing night shifts or moving to an all-women team “so that I wouldn’t have to deal with male co-workers” (Angela, 24, fashion worker). Other workers reported that they had considered or were currently considering changing employers, or moving out of customer service work entirely:

It actually makes me want to move into a different industry ... because being in retail, customer service is always the number one priority, you can’t escape it.
(Natasha, 22, fashion worker)

Participants described how experiencing sexual harassment in the workplace could have significant and “lasting” (Delilah, 19, intimate apparel store manager) impacts on their everyday lives outside of work. The impacts described varied greatly. For example, some participants commented that their experiences (particularly as younger workers in retail) had made them “scared of who you can trust” (Caroline, 24, fashion worker) and cautious of older men outside of the workplace. For example, one manager of a small, independent retail store who had experienced repeated physical harassment from her boss recalled how she had recently asked an older female staff member at her university “what male professors I need to be afraid of” (Kylie, 24, independent retail manager), highlighting these spillover effects. Another worker described how, after her report of being sexually harassed by her manager in a previous retail workplace was dismissed, she withdrew from work and social life, demonstrating the profound impact that workplace sexual harassment can have:

I wasn't able to work for six months. I went into full hermit mode. I was just holed up in my house not wanting to see friends, not wanting to see anyone. I didn't want to do anything because I felt so violated and it was awful.
(Adeline, 25, intimate apparel store worker)

Perhaps most concerning, one intimate apparel store manager commented that the pervasive nature of the sexual harassment in her workplace had caused her to normalise these behaviours and become more tolerant of them both inside and outside of the workplace:

I've noticed outside of work I've become more relaxed with other people's behaviour towards me ... It can have such a flow-on effect, which I feel can be and is really damaging.
(Delilah, 19, intimate apparel store manager)

While the men in our focus groups were not as likely to describe personally experiencing these impacts, they expressed concern and sometimes distress about the prevalence of sexual harassment in their workplaces and were motivated to prevent it.

Conclusion

This chapter provided critical insights on how retail workers and managers perceive and encounter sexual harassment, as well as the repercussions it has on their lives. The findings demonstrated the pervasive nature of sexual harassment in the retail industry and its significant and detrimental effects on both workers and managers. In Chapter 7, we present data on workers' and managers' experiences of the organisational mechanisms designed to prevent workplace sexual harassment and address incidents when they occur and the organisational and industry-wide interventions that could be beneficial in further enhancing prevention and response efforts in the retail industry.

CHAPTER 7

Workers' and managers' experiences of sexual harassment reporting, training and preventative measures

This chapter analyses data collected in focus groups with workers and managers in the retail industry on how they perceive that their employers are dealing with sexual harassment and their ideas for how to improve this. The chapter has three key themes: the reporting process for sexual harassment and direct experiences with reporting; potential barriers to reporting, and experiences and perceptions of training in being able to address and respond to incidents of sexual harassment; and other preventative measures to prevent and address sexual harassment in the workplace.

Sexual harassment reporting and complaints process

Worker and manager understanding of the sexual harassment reporting and complaints process

A key theme discussed in focus groups was participants' understanding and experience of reporting sexual harassment at work. Workers and managers discussed where they would go if they experienced or witnessed an incident and wished to make a complaint. Managers also discussed how they would respond if a sexual harassment complaint was made to them by a worker they manage, and their familiarity with the reporting process.

Most workers lacked a detailed understanding of their organisation's complaints processes and the options available for reporting incidents of harassment. Some said they would not know "where to go" (Alessandra, 25, supermarket worker) or "who to go to" (Jasmine, 22, supermarket manager) if they wanted to report a sexual harassment incident and commented that such information was not widely available in their workplaces or had not been given to them. Many agreed that if they wanted to make a complaint, they would first have to independently research their options for reporting:

The problem is that I actually don't know where I would go ... I'd have to go into my [employer intranet] page and research myself. Where can I go? Who can I tell? Because, yeah, that information hasn't really been given. (Alessandra, 25, supermarket worker)

Workers expressed a general lack of confidence in organisational processes, saying that they were more likely to seek information about how to identify and report sexual harassment from a third party or a platform outside their own employer's resources. For instance, workers consistently said they would seek advice from Google or social media sites (e.g. "I'd Google it"; Ashley, 20, fashion worker; Natalie, 30, fashion worker; Vanessa, 27, fashion worker; Delilah, 19, intimate apparel store manager; "I'd probably research on TikTok"; Leah, 22, fashion worker) about whether their experiences constituted sexual harassment, would be deemed serious enough to warrant action, and their options for reporting, before they would consider raising a complaint directly with their employer. Participants commented that they would still take these steps even when they were certain that what they had experienced was harassment:

The first thing I'd probably do was make sure that what I've experienced is defined as sexual harassment. Which the truth is, I think we all know exactly what it is and I sure as hell do. ... but that's where I'd start and then what could be done about it would be my next step. (Ashley, 20, fashion worker)

These observations are interesting, given the robust and nuanced understanding of sexual harassment observed among workers and managers and discussed in Chapter 6, illustrating that workers perceive that some incidences of sexual harassment may not be seen as serious enough or "bad enough" (Delilah, 19, intimate apparel store manager) to be acted upon by employers. In contrast, some workers were aware of where to find information about their organisation's complaints process, such

as on their employer's intranet, employer-aided confidential help lines, staff notice boards or employer training modules.

Most workers viewed their direct managers or supervisors to be their primary point of contact for reporting an incident of sexual harassment, but many participants noted the problems inherent in this approach. For example, reporting to the manager was clearly inappropriate where the manager was the perpetrator, a situation that had been personally experienced or witnessed by many workers:

Their version of how to protect yourself from co-workers is just, "Speak to your manager" ... and it's like, "Okay, and what if that's the person who's doing the harassment?" (Alice, 31, supermarket worker)

Taking a complaint up the management line in this instance was also perceived to be undesirable, due to a perception that management staff were personal friends ("all buddy-buddy"; Jasmine, 22, supermarket manager) and would not believe the worker's complaint or take it seriously. Workers reported that they would need to know their manager well and feel comfortable with them to report a sensitive issue like sexual harassment. However, establishing this rapport was deemed to be particularly difficult for casual staff who had limited interactions with their managers, or in organisations with high management staff turnover. For example, one supermarket duty manager commented:

Managers come and go within a month, maybe [stay] a year and a half max, so it's difficult to retain a professional relationship with someone and feel like you can trust them enough to go and speak to them about another team member, or a customer, or another manager. (Ava, 30, supermarket manager)

A few workers perceived that management staff lacked the training and skills to be able to respond appropriately:

We have a really high turnover of management at my work and they're normally very, very young managers that come through who don't actually know how to handle these experiences. That makes it really tricky if you try to come to them with something and they've got no idea what to do. (Vanessa, 27, fashion worker)

Some workers reported they had been told by their employer (such as during training) that complaints should be raised with their direct managers, but that they had not been made aware of alternative options for reporting if this was inappropriate. For example, in the absence of any information being available, one supermarket worker reported contacting the Fair Work Ombudsman and the Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees' Association (the retail workers' union) to find out if there was someone other than her manager who she could report an incident to as she did not have a good relationship with her manager:

I actually rang Fair Work at the time, because I didn't know where to go, and they were the ones who told me to call the union. So that's what I mean. (Cassandra, 27, supermarket worker)

Another fashion retail worker said that in a previous retail role she and her colleagues had to "really press for" the details of an HR representative who they could report to:

I didn't know who to reach out to at all. It was more a whole bunch of us really pressed on the issue to a manager who eventually gave us the number of an HR representative. (Bethany, 22, fashion worker)

Retail managers had varying levels of understanding of the sexual harassment complaints processes in their organisations and what to do if workers made a sexual harassment complaint. Some were able to describe in detail the process for handling complaints, including how to escalate these if needed and the supports they could offer to the complainant, such as employee assistance programs. However, others were unfamiliar with the complaints process and commented that, in the absence of "clear guidelines" (Jemma, 38, fashion manager) on how to deal with sexual harassment complaints, they would not know what to do if a complaint was made or how best to support the complainant.

Workers argued that information about the different pathways and options to find information about sexual harassment and reporting other than to management staff (including those "higher up"; Bethany, 22, fashion worker) were needed, and that this information should be easily accessible. Having a single, independent entity

that workers and managers could consult (possibly anonymously) for advice on workplace sexual harassment incidents and information about the reporting process was suggested as one option that would make it easier for workers to identify and report harassment. Having this entity be independent from employers was more acceptable to managers, who perceived it to be “unbiased”:

Having something available online where people can put in an anonymous question saying, “Hey, outside source, would you consider this sexual harassment?” Being able to explain a specific situation to someone who doesn’t work in the store and them saying, “Yes, it is”, or “No, it’s not”. “Yes, you should pursue it, here’s your steps.” (Ava, 30, supermarket manager)

Workers’ and managers’ experiences of the sexual harassment complaints process

Focus group participants discussed their direct experiences with reporting workplace sexual harassment. Most workers who had themselves made a sexual harassment complaint did so by raising it with a manager or supervisor. Complaints were made about both customers and colleagues and were not about their direct manager. Some retail managers also recalled having made a sexual harassment complaint to their direct manager though this was much less frequent.

Some participants reported positive experiences of making a sexual harassment complaint to their direct manager and having it resolved to their satisfaction. However, most recounted negative experiences, for example, where their complaint did not result in any action at all, resulted in an outcome that was unacceptable to them or was ineffective, or where they were not made aware of the outcome of their complaint. In addition, many workers reported receiving little or no follow-up and support from their manager after making a complaint. These experiences corroded workers’ “faith” (Angelica, 40, supermarket worker; Sabrina, 40, supermarket worker) in the reporting process and their desire to report incidents of sexual harassment in the future. This was perhaps best exemplified by a resigned and exasperated supermarket worker:

I didn’t bother complaining or saying anything. What’s the point? Nothing ever gets done. (Angelica, 40, supermarket worker)

In contrast, workers felt that managers who quickly and appropriately actioned their complaints and were “willing to stand up for their staff members” (Safia, 25, supermarket worker) felt valued, supported, and confident to call out or report harassment when it occurred.

Management inaction

When participants did make complaints about harassment to their direct manager, many reported that their concerns were commonly downplayed or dismissed and did not result in any organisational changes. This was perceived to be particularly true of customer-perpetrated harassment, which was widely treated as “part and parcel” (Harper, 33, intimate apparel store worker) of retail work, and verbal as opposed to physical harassment. Two intimate apparel participants described the responses they expected to get from management staff when reporting verbal harassment from a customer:

The manager just says, “Oh, that’s terrible” or “Same thing happened to me.” (Eliza, 27, intimate apparel store worker)

Like, “Oh, that’s no good.” Or dismissive, “Oh, I’m so sorry. I hope you have a better day.” (Delilah, 19, intimate apparel store manager)

Consequently, workers perceived that any future complaints of sexual harassment would be “brushed off” (Celeste, 31, intimate apparel store worker) and “not taken seriously” (Eliza, 27, intimate apparel store worker). For one supermarket duty manager, witnessing her colleague’s complaint of sexual harassment and stalking be dismissed by the store manager made her question “who you can trust” (Ava, 30, supermarket manager) to report these incidents to in the workplace:

The customer verbally, sexually harassed the closing supervisor on checkouts. He would stalk her and come in specifically on the nights she was working, try to hit on her ... he would sit on the chairs outside of work for hours staring at her. She tried going to the

store manager and he would not do anything. And if your store manager isn't willing to take *literal stalking* seriously, let alone the sexual harassment part of it, what are you meant to do? Who are you meant to trust? (Ava, 30, supermarket manager)

A small number of focus group participants reported that they had escalated their complaint outside of their employer, namely to the Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees' Association, the Fair Work Ombudsman or the AHRC, when their managers did not respond at all or appropriately to their complaints of sexual harassment. For example, one supermarket worker commented that it was only when she escalated her complaint to the Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees' Association that action was taken to ban an abusive customer from her store:

I had to get a customer banned last year. It got so bad, not the sexual harassment – he only did that to me once. It was more of him being a psycho ... But I had to go to my union in order for them to do something, because my management would not ban him. (Ava, 30, supermarket manager)

Such experiences also made participants feel as though their employers prioritised money over staff wellbeing, and that they lacked authentic care for their frontline retail workers. For example, one supermarket worker commented that "it's all about the shareholders, the money, the customer. We are that far down the line as workers it's not funny" (Angelica, 40, supermarket worker). Another supermarket worker expressed cynicism about what she perceived as her employer's shallow attempts to prevent sexual harassment in the workplace, which was a sentiment shared among several participants:

They do that thing of, "Oh, we are here for you and we care deeply." It's so much bullshit ... They don't care. They just care about their money and how much they're making. (Sabrina, 40, supermarket worker)

Retail managers who participated in manager-only focus groups did not express the same cynicism as participants in the mixed worker/manager groups, and some commented that their employer's sexual harassment prevention efforts (e.g. training) were good or had improved over time.

Outcomes of complaints are undesirable or ineffective

Participants in the mixed worker/manager focus groups reported that sometimes managers did respond to workers' complaints but did so in a way that resulted in outcomes that were undesirable to the complainants. For example, some participants commented that, in response to complaints of peer-to-peer harassment, managers often rostered the complainant and perpetrator on different shifts or moved the perpetrator to a different department. Workers saw this as a "band-aid" solution (Christina, 18, fashion worker) which did not prevent further sexual harassment in the workplace nor hold the perpetrator accountable for their actions. Perversely, it could reduce the number of shifts available to the target, as one fashion retail worker explained:

Splitting up shifts, that's not helping anyone. That person isn't learning from their actions. You don't actually feel that validated. It's like, oh great, so there's now less possible shifts for you because he's there. (Sydney, 19, fashion worker)

One manager working in a large retail store described rostering the target and perpetrator on in departments or different shifts as "moving the problem" and discussed that while it effectively prevented some contact between workers, they were still "under the same roof" and thus the target was likely "going to have encounters with them, possibly on a day-to-day basis still" (Kieran, 31, manager).

For customer-perpetrated harassment, other forms of action were deemed to be, at best, ineffective and, at worst, creating additional work for retail workers. For example, supermarket workers reported that customers who perpetrated harassment or abuse were often banned from the premises. But such bans were seen to be difficult to enforce or encouraged such customers to shop when the store was minimally staffed, such as at closing time, potentially exacerbating risk:

We've had many, many people banned from the store and they just come in when they know there's no managers, when they know there's only two or three staff on at night. (Angelica, 40, supermarket worker)

Lack of communication on complaint outcomes

Another key theme about complaints processes was the lack of clear communication on the outcome of investigations. Several workers recalled experiences where they or their colleagues made official complaints but were never informed of the resolution. For example, one fashion retail worker described how, after a serious incident in her workplace which involved the police, workers were not consulted and no further preventative action like training was taken:

After that, no one spoke about it. None of the managers brought it up with us ... there was no training, no talk of how can we prevent this in the future? What do we do when instances like this happen? It was literally, “Everyone get back to work, it never happened. Keep going.” (Leah, 22, fashion worker)

Another participant employed in fashion retail described how, after a perpetrator in her workplace had been removed from the workplace, workers were not told what happened or why:

After the few instances that [sexual harassment] did occur, nothing was mentioned to anybody. The person was just gone. There was no validation of what anybody experienced. There was no discussion, there was nothing. It was just, “That person’s gone. Okay, everyone move on.” (Vanessa, 27, fashion worker)

Without clear communication from their employer, participants perceived that sexual harassment incidents were “just swept under the carpet, basically” (Vanessa, 27, fashion worker).

Lack of post-incident support

Several participants commented that, after making a complaint to their manager, managers never “followed up” with offers of support. Participants discussed how this minimised the harm of the experience and made them feel as though their managers, and retail employers more generally, were not interested in their safety or wellbeing. For example, one supermarket worker expected that

her manager would provide no support after “another day-to-day complaint” of customer-perpetrated verbal harassment, minimising the impacts:

If we had side effects of that, if we were affected by that, too bad. Nobody’s going to chase that up with us and ask us how we’re going, how we’re feeling, or how we’re coping with that situation that happened last night. (Angelica, 40, supermarket worker)

Workers said they “just want someone to ask how you’re doing” (Celine, 20, supermarket manager): they wanted to be given an opportunity to speak about their experiences and have the gravity of the experience acknowledged. Others commented that more support for workers was needed, and some suggested that employers should offer free, independent counselling support: “someone you can go to for free because it’s paid by the company, who’s not part of your workplace that you can go and speak to” (Talia, 30, supermarket worker). As well as helping workers deal with the psychosocial impacts of such experiences, one supermarket worker commented having support available would help to acknowledge sexual harassment as a real problem in retail workplaces and encourage reporting:

If there’s no support there, it’s like you’re saying this isn’t really a problem ... [having support available] just sends a message that this does happen, and if it does happen, then we have these resources there for you to use. (Talia, 30, supermarket worker)

One night supervisor at a large supermarket said that while workers were entitled to four free counselling sessions in her workplace, this was “not that well known” to workers (Celine, 20, supermarket manager) and that they had to access and organise this independently. She argued that workers should be made aware of these services and suggested that, in the event of an incident, managers should offer to organise the sessions for the worker to “show support and ... make it so that people that have already gone through something hard don’t have to spend more time reliving the incident trying to access help” (Celine, 20, supermarket manager).

Barriers to making a formal sexual harassment complaint

Focus group participants were asked to reflect on the potential barriers to reporting sexual harassment in their workplaces. The barriers identified in focus groups were consistent with those proposed in key informant interviews: lack of faith in the complaints process, fear of reprisal or retribution, and normalisation of sexual harassment as “part of the job” (Delilah, 19, intimate apparel store manager; Celeste, 31, intimate apparel store worker). Participants also perceived that “nothing gets done” (Sabrina, 40, supermarket worker) about customer-perpetrated harassment, which was an additional barrier to reporting.

Lack of faith in the complaints process

Participants in the mixed worker/manager focus groups lacked faith that, if they were to report or complain about sexual harassment, it would be taken seriously, acted upon, and result in an outcome that was acceptable to them. Participants also lacked faith that their complaints would remain confidential and expressed concern that complaints would “get back to them” or become workplace gossip. Their lack of faith in the complaints process was the most significant barrier to reporting and was raised by participants in the majority (9/10) of the mixed worker/manager focus group discussions.

Participants’ cynicism about the sexual harassment complaints process usually stemmed from negative past interactions with the complaints process (either personal experiences or observations of colleagues). Management inaction or minimisation in response to past complaints prompted a belief that there was “no point” (Vanessa, 27, fashion worker) in reporting, or that reporting would potentially do more harm than good. For example, one supermarket worker commented that she would not approach her store manager about an incident due to how a colleague’s past experience was handled:

I wouldn’t do that because there was an incident with one of my colleagues where he was sexually harassed on a closing shift, by himself, and he called the store manager and was like, “Look, this has just happened.

I feel really uncomfortable. Is it possible that I close the store early and go home because I don’t want to be here anymore?” And the manager said, “No you have to stay.” After I heard that, there’s no way I would go straight to my manager for stuff like that. I don’t want to get pushed underneath just how he did. So I would just avoid that completely.
(Alessandra, 25, supermarket worker)

Participants perceived the process of making a formal complaint to be arduous (“long”, Nisha, 30, intimate apparel store worker; “a lot of work”, Vanessa, 27, fashion worker; “so hard to pursue”, Delilah, 19, intimate apparel store manager), which further deterred them from taking formal action, as one worker in fashion retail explained:

I think the work it takes to fill in those forms, report it, wait 5–10 business days for someone to open it in head office, who’s then not going to do anything about it anyway ... I have so many times seen the cycle of nothing happening that it’s like, “What’s the point?”
(Vanessa, 27, fashion worker)

A few participants raised concerns that their complaints would not be kept confidential, which deterred them reporting. They worried that reports may become workplace gossip and “instead of taking it seriously, they [management staff] might treat it as gossip” (Jasmine, 22, supermarket manager). Participants commented that this could leave the worker “worse off” (Vanessa, 27, fashion worker) than if they had not reported the incident, as colleagues and management staff may view or treat them differently.

Participants suggested having an independent entity that specialised in handling cases of workplace sexual harassment that workers could report incidents to. They perceived that this would promote faith in the complaints process as it would ensure that complaints were dealt with appropriately rather than being “ignored and swept under the rug” (Adeline, 25, intimate apparel store worker):

... having a department that would actually be specialised in that ... you know you’re actually going to get heard, you’re going to get recognised, you’re going to get some form of help, would be bloody fantastic.
(Adeline, 25, intimate apparel store worker)

Participants also perceived that having the entity independent of their employer would ensure that their complaints remained confidential, which they felt was especially important for incidents perpetrated by colleagues or management staff.

Fear of reprisal or retribution

Participants cited worker fear that they would lose their job or lose shifts as a significant barrier to reporting sexual harassment. This was perceived to be a particular concern for casual workers and younger workers who were new to the workforce, due to the relative precarity of their employment. One casual supermarket worker explained younger, casual workers' thought processes:

Most of us have been working in this since we were young girls, and again, like what Cassandra was saying, when she was younger and she had no other choice but this job, you don't want this perspective of you, because you're so scared that you'll lose your job. You don't want to be treated differently or get your shifts cut, especially when you're casual. (Alessandra, 25, supermarket worker)

It was also a concern when the perpetrator controlled the worker's access to shifts, as a man employed full-time at a large retailer described:

If it's someone above you that's doing it, you might think, "Oh, I'm just going to have to put up with this to keep my job", or something. (Roland, 35, worker)

Workers were concerned that if they made a sexual harassment complaint, or too many complaints, they would be labelled "a problematic employee" (Cassandra, 27, supermarket worker) or a "trouble worker" (Alessandra, 25, supermarket worker) by management staff. They commented that being known in this way to management could result in workers losing their job or shifts, being "quietly fired" (where casual staff lost their jobs through management staff "reducing hours, cutting communication, not keeping you in the loop"; Adeline, 25, intimate apparel store worker), or not having their complaints taken seriously in the future. This concern was raised by workers in casual, permanent part-time and permanent full-time employment. For example,

one intimate apparel store worker employed full-time commented:

Once you're on their radar, every little thing you do, they would either not take it seriously or they'll just get rid of you. (Eliza, 27, intimate apparel store worker)

Several workers, particularly those employed in large supermarkets, commented that they were "replaceable" (Natasha, 22, fashion worker; Alessandra, 25, supermarket worker; Cassandra, 27, supermarket worker; Alice, 31, supermarket worker; Delilah, 19, intimate apparel store manager) or "just a number" (Safia, 25, supermarket worker; Sabrina, 40, supermarket worker) to their employers, who they believed would fire them, replace their shifts or hire a new worker without hesitation.

Normalisation of sexual harassment

As discussed in Chapter 6, focus groups revealed that sexual harassment was pervasive in retail workplaces and commonly experienced by women workers. Some participants' experiences of sexual harassment at work were so frequent that they had become desensitised to it and viewed it as a regular and everyday "part of the job" (Vanessa, 27, fashion worker). On customer-perpetrated sexual harassment, participants reflected that expectations of worker politeness, friendliness and deference to customers, and notions of customer sovereignty deeply ingrained in customer service work, made them feel they had to accept customer-perpetrated harassment rather than resist or make a formal complaint. Some argued that these expectations were particularly pronounced for women workers.

Women have to just take things and always be nice to people no matter what. And I feel like retail really pushes that. It doesn't matter. You still have to be nice, you still have to be courteous, even if they [customers] make you uncomfortable. That's just what happens. (Eliza, 27, intimate apparel store worker)

These expectations were reinforced when participants' complaints about customer-perpetrated harassment were dismissed. Customer feedback mechanisms in some workplaces prevented workers from calling out

inappropriate behaviour for fear it would result in poor customer feedback and punishment from management staff, as one casual intimate apparel store worker described:

Do I tell him [customer] off in the store, and him complain, and then I get in trouble because I told this guy off? If I was to say, “Well, he was making comments about my chest”, they’d be like, “Well, don’t yell at a customer.” (Celeste, 31, intimate apparel store worker)

Perception that nothing can be done about customer-perpetrated harassment

Many workers reported that customer behaviour was hard to control as customers were usually unknown to the store and had often left by the time workers could raise the incident with their manager or call security. This, coupled with the fact that workers’ complaints of customer-perpetrated harassment were often dismissed, not addressed, or resulted in bans which were not upheld or ineffective, made workers feel as though “nothing can be done” (Shannon, 27, fashion worker) about customer-perpetrated harassment and thus there was “no point in reporting it” (Julian, 26, intimate apparel store worker). One fashion retail worker explained:

If someone walks into your shop, says something gross and sexually suggestive to you and then walks out ... you can write a report about a nameless, faceless individual who said this thing to you ... it’s not going to do anything. (Sydney, 19, fashion worker)

Managers also expressed helplessness in dealing with customer-perpetrated harassment. They described feeling “at the mercy of the customers and their behaviour” (Brandon, 40, supermarket manager) and commented that customer-perpetrated abuse and harassment was difficult to deal with or unavoidable. When probed about what could be done by organisations to prevent customer-perpetrated harassment, participants struggled to come up with feasible solutions. For example, managers commented that the only way to prevent workers experiencing this harassment was to “have an AI robot serve the customer” (Jemma, 38, fashion manager) or “fully ban every customer that does it, which is basically impossible” (Celine, 20, supermarket manager).

Training about sexual harassment

Workers’ and managers’ experiences of training about sexual harassment

Focus group participants were asked whether they had received training about sexual harassment, and their experiences of this training. Most reported having completed online training modules which covered a range of general topics, including their employer code of conduct, at the commencement of their employment, and sometimes as “refresher” training at a later stage. However, many participants did not recall receiving any training at all that specifically addressed workplace sexual harassment.

Most workers whose online modules included sexual harassment content commented that it was addressed “very briefly” (Ashley, 20, fashion worker), for example, by providing a definition of sexual harassment but few or no examples of behaviours which may constitute it. For example, one fashion retail worker described her training:

There was certainly something broad about “You deserve to feel safe and no one should make you uncomfortable”, but nothing drilling into how people can make you feel uncomfortable. What about when they’re using sexual innuendos or something to do that? Nothing specific like that. (Sydney, 19, fashion worker)

Participants also commented that training, when it did cover sexual harassment, generally only focused on peer-to-peer harassment and did not cover harassment perpetrated by managers or customers. One supermarket worker described the training she received:

It’s all about ... what to do if it’s sexual harassment between co-workers, but there’s nothing about what happens if a customer comes onto you. (Alice, 31, supermarket worker)

They commented that the training also focused primarily on “what not to do”, framing workers as perpetrators, rather than on how workers should respond to incidents when they arose. One worker at a large retail store described this approach:

When people are onboarded ... they're told what's expected and the ground rules of don't touch anyone, don't do anything inappropriate, because there will be consequences. (Roland, 35, worker)

Participants argued that the compliance-focused “don't do this, don't do this, don't do this” (Cassandra, 27, supermarket worker) approach to training did not adequately prepare workers for the range of sexual harassment incidents experienced by retail workers nor how to respond when these did occur.

In contrast to most participants' experiences of training about sexual harassment, which they reported to be vague and primarily focused on peer-to-peer (rather than customer- or manager-perpetrated) harassment, a small number of workers reported receiving in-depth sexual harassment training. One intimate apparel store worker reported receiving comprehensive, standalone sexual harassment online training modules at induction and regularly throughout her employment, which “coached workers through” a variety of video scenarios of sexual harassment specifically tailored to their workplace environment and how to respond. She continued:

It's very realistic. One video they have, a male approaches the woman working there and makes a comment about the lingerie. And then it sort of tells you, “This is what you do. Take a step back. Make space. Don't be alone.” It's kind of step by step. (Celeste, 31, intimate apparel store worker)

In the manager focus groups, we asked managers to describe the training they received and whether this training was specifically for management staff. All but one participant in the manager focus groups reported that they received the same training as all other workers, rather than this being specific to management staff. Several managers commented that they received no training or guidance whatsoever on how to respond to sexual harassment incidents in the workplace, which left them ill-prepared to respond when they received complaints. For example, one assistant manager employed in fashion retail commented:

They always train people [workers] that if you feel uncomfortable, or if you had an experience of sexual harassment, you should talk to HR, the store manager, or the assistant manager. But I'm assistant store manager and even I don't know what to do because there is no clear guideline. (Jemma, 38, fashion manager)

This sentiment was echoed by a service supervisor employed at a big-box retail store:

If a staff member comes to me, there's no guidelines that I have to follow, on what to follow up with. I'll either take them to a manager – if they're comfortable to go on their own and tell them the story, that's fine. If they would rather someone go with them, then we do that. But there's no guidelines on how we're supposed to follow it up. (Luna, 49, big-box store manager)

In contrast, one department manager at a large supermarket commented that their experience was with a much more thorough approach. They described that the process for responding to sexual harassment complaints was “drilled into” management staff through training, posters and conversations with upper management. This participant explained:

It's drilled into us [managers] a fair bit. Through the training and just through – my manager, who is an area manager, and store management, they'll keep making sure you know the process. There will be a print-out on the wall that sort of says, “If there's a reported incident, here are the steps, here's who you can call.” All that sort of thing. (Brandon, 40, supermarket manager)

Workers' and managers' perceptions of training about sexual harassment

Those focus group participants who recalled receiving some form of online sexual harassment training generally discussed that the training did not adequately prepare them to recognise and respond to the sexual harassment that they experienced in the workplace, either because it lacked detail or included example scenarios that were generic, outdated or unrealistic. Workers commented

that the online format made the training unengaging, and some admitted that they would not pay attention to the online modules but would rather “press play, walk away, come back in half an hour, tick a box” (Alice, 31, supermarket worker). Only a few individual participants found their training helpful.

Several participants perceived training about sexual harassment and the accompanying poster materials to be a “tick-and-flick” (Peter, 34, supermarket manager) compliance measure for employers to “cover their asses” (Oliver, 33, supermarket worker) legally, rather than a genuine attempt to help workers recognise and respond to sexual harassment incidents as they arose. Concerningly, one manager at a large retail store commented that their training was “literally just company compliance” (Kieran, 31, manager) which could be used to justify termination when incidents occurred. He continued:

It saves our butt at the end of the day ... if we wanted to terminate, that’s the way you could do it going, you’ve signed on this date, however on these dates we’ve found footage of you doing X, Y, Z. (Kieran, 31, manager)

The fact that sexual harassment was rarely, and often never, spoken about by management staff or senior leadership outside of training further reinforced this view of training as a compliance mechanism rather than a sincere attempt to prevent sexual harassment in the workplace and help workers respond.

Suggestions for improving training

Participants viewed training as a potentially valuable mechanism for enhancing their ability and confidence to respond to sexual harassment incidents, and to increase the visibility of the issue in the workplace. For training to be effective, it needed to be conducted face-to-face with team members, be conducted regularly, expressly address sexual harassment, include real-world scenarios which are regularly updated, and cover bystander intervention. Additionally, training in sexual harassment and/or guidelines specifically for management and senior leadership staff were needed.

Conduct training face-to-face

Participants expressed a preference for interactive face-to-face training as they argued that this would enable discussion and interaction, allow workers to ask questions, and increase engagement with the material. They suggested that training should be conducted with a group of team members, to ensure that everyone “gets the same message” (Adeline, 25, intimate apparel store worker) and is “on the same page” (Natalie, 30, fashion worker) about appropriate and inappropriate behaviours and processes for reporting. They perceived that conducting the training face-to-face in groups would not only help to prevent harassment, but may also encourage bystander intervention, as one intimate apparel store manager explained:

Doing it with your teammates it’s like, “We’re all in this together” ... That way if you see something happening to your co-worker, then you can stand up for them as well. (Delilah, 19, intimate apparel store manager)

Conduct training regularly

Participants asserted training needed to be conducted not only at induction but also regularly thereafter, such as quarterly or biannually. Regular training was necessary to ensure workers retained the information, and to increase the visibility of the issue in the workplace and create an environment where workers felt safe to discuss their experiences. They also suggested having informal, manager-led conversations about sexual harassment outside of training, for example during team discussions or regular, one-on-one “check-ins” with workers, as one worker in fashion retail described:

... some way of reminding staff. If you ever have staff meetings or even just a supervisor at the start of the shift, just giving a reminder of “If anyone makes you feel uncomfortable, remember what was spoken about in training.” Or, “Remember, you’ve got the option to say this, this, and this.” (Amber, 36, fashion worker)

One supermarket department manager reported doing this, and commented that he used the mandatory training modules completed by all staff as an “inroad” to discussions about sexual harassment.

Ensure training expressly addresses sexual harassment

Participants commented that training needed to expressly address sexual harassment. They wanted dedicated sexual harassment training, which clearly addressed the issue rather than using euphemistic language and “tiptoeing around it with words and replacements” (Ashley, 20, fashion worker). One participant suggested making sexual harassment “front and centre” (Shahid, 25, fashion worker) of the general induction training to emphasise the importance of the issue in the workplace.

Include regularly updated, real-world scenarios in training

For training to be effective, participants said that it needed to be scenario-based, and that the scenarios needed to be relevant to their specific workplace context and to be regularly updated to ensure relevance. Some participants suggested using real past cases from the workplace, as one manager at a large retail store described:

... having a few examples or a bit of a case study of what’s been brought up in the past. More of an FYI if this does happen, these are the steps to prevent it from happening again. (Kieran, 31, manager)

Cover bystander intervention in training

Participants were asked whether they received bystander training, that is, training which equips people with the skills to respond to incidents they observe. Most participants who received training reported that it did not cover what they should do if they witnessed or were made aware of sexual harassment in their workplace, but participants felt that such an approach would be valuable. Some participants commented that, if they witnessed a sexual harassment incident, they would not know when to intervene, what to do, or how to best support their colleagues, which prevented them from acting. They perceived that bystander training would help overcome these barriers and give workers “extra confidence” (Lisa, 36, supermarket manager) to support their colleagues.

However, participants in one focus group of casual women employed in fashion retail commented that bystander intervention was outside their scope of responsibility (as in: “It’s not in our pay grade”; Ashley, 20, fashion worker) and that it should be managers receiving this training and stepping in, rather than putting the onus on workers.

Include additional training specifically for management staff

As noted previously, several management staff reported that they did not receive any training or guidance at all on what to do in response to sexual harassment complaints, and some workers perceived that management staff were not adequately trained to deal with complaints. Participants asserted that more training, guidelines and resources for management staff outlining their responsibilities on sexual harassment and how to respond to reported incidents was needed. One service supervisor at a big-box store commented:

They [employers] need to educate their staff when it’s not acceptable, and give their managers and supervisors guidelines to follow on what to do with it. (Luna, 49, big-box store manager)

Another participant in fashion retail suggested that managers participate in specialised training days or conferences with managers from various retail organisations to ensure that managers across the industry (rather than only internally to the company) were “on the same page” (Natalie, 30, fashion worker) about sexual harassment and how to respond. Managers told us that they wanted more guidance on how to respond to sexual harassment complaints and support their staff following incidents. As one small retail manager commented:

If we had the resources and knowledge of how to aid our staff recover from what they’ve just experienced, and how to help them move forward in the reporting and perhaps counselling and stuff like that, then as a manager, we would be better equipped to help our staff. (Ruby, 67, manager⁹)

⁹Sector not identified.

Preventative strategies

Participants were asked about other measures that existed in their workplaces to prevent sexual harassment from occurring and to help workers respond when incidents occurred. Participants discussed security measures, proactive management support and customer awareness campaigns currently used in their workplaces and offered suggestions for how these could be improved. All participants, including men who had less personal experience as a target of sexual harassment in the workplace, were concerned about sexual harassment in their workplaces and were motivated to prevent it. They suggested additional preventative measures such as mandatory reporting requirements which could be implemented in retail workplaces.

Security measures

The participants had had varied experience with and perceptions of security measures in their retail workplaces, such as security personnel, CCTV, body cameras, duress buttons and code words, which are described below.

Security personnel

Participants whose stores were located in major shopping centres had centre security available to their store, however many felt that it was not effective in preventing or responding to customer-perpetrated harassment. They perceived that centre security staff, like retail workers, had limited rights and ability to discipline customers (“they can’t do anything either”; Adeline, 25, intimate apparel store worker) or lacked sufficient training to do so. One state manager at an intimate apparel retailer explained:

They [centre security] can diffuse a situation, but legally they cannot ask someone to leave the premises, or detain anyone in any way, if there is something more severe happening.
(Bridget, 27, intimate apparel store manager)

Several workers commented that they did not know how to access centre security, or that the process for contacting them was time-consuming and unclear, and thus not

suitable for dealing with customer-perpetrated sexual harassment, as one fashion retail worker described:

Having to go into the backroom to call awkwardly this number that takes you through five hotlines to get to them. (Vanessa, 27, fashion worker)

Participants also reported that centre security often had a “very slow response time” (Celeste, 31, intimate apparel store worker) when responding to staff call-outs, which was not helpful for dealing with customers who were usually only briefly in the store. Workers wanted their stores to have “a stronger relationship” (Leah, 22, fashion worker) with centre security, and for security to be more accessible and visible to workers. Workers suggested centre security should regularly check in with stores, and that workers should have a means of contacting security directly.

Some participants employed in large supermarkets reported that their stores had sub-contracted security personnel currently or had had them previously during COVID-19 to enforce social distancing regulations and prevent customer abuse. The presence of in-store security personnel increased workers’ sense of safety, and some participants perceived that it effectively deterred inappropriate customer behaviour. Several participants commented that in-store security was needed, particularly for high-risk stores or times such as on night or closing shifts, but doubted their employers would implement these measures due to the financial cost. One participant at a large supermarket commented:

Unfortunately, we don’t have security in our store. We had security for a couple of months at the very, very start of COVID to enforce those COVID rules, and it was fantastic. But they [employer] want to save money and don’t want to put security on, although we desperately need it, particularly any day of the week after 7 pm. (Angelica, 40, supermarket worker)

Another worker in an intimate apparel store shared the same view:

From their point of view, it’s [security] not very value-adding to their bottom line, because it doesn’t make money ... I just don’t see it happening anytime soon. (Jennifer, 31, intimate apparel store worker)

Video surveillance

Some participants' workplaces had CCTV cameras, which they viewed positively as they provided them with "actual video evidence" (Celine, 20, supermarket manager) to substantiate sexual harassment claims. In contrast, participants whose workplaces did not have CCTV commented that they were unable to provide evidence of harassment ("we can't even capture this abuse happening"; Natasha, 22, fashion worker), and they expressed concerns that without it their claims would not be believed.

Especially in my store, there's no cameras, so there's no proof of anything. It's, I guess, our words against the customer's and obviously the customer would deny it. (Eliza, 27, intimate apparel store worker)

Some participants commented that CCTV was not in "high risk" areas such as fitting rooms, car parks and click-and-collect areas, which they perceived limited its effectiveness. We asked workers whether they felt body cameras (an initiative being trialled by some large retail employers) would be effective in preventing harassment. Workers perceived body cameras were "a bit extreme" (Angela, 24, fashion worker) or "intrusive" (Serena, 24, fashion manager) and raised concerns that they would be used as surveillance mechanisms by their employers.

Duress alarms and code words

Several participants reported that their workplace had code words which they could use to signal to other team members, either via the PA system or earpieces, when they needed support. The majority of these participants were positive about the code words and said other workers were responsive to them when they were used.

If I call a [code word], I will have every guy in the store beside me within seconds. (Angelica, 40, supermarket worker)

When asked what participants thought of duress alarms ("help buttons" located in-store which workers could press to signal for the attention of colleagues, management staff or security), many were positive, thinking these would provide workers with "a discrete way of calling for help" (Caleb, 24, fashion worker). As these measures are

less costly than security personnel or video surveillance, workers also believed they would be more likely to be implemented by employers.

Proactive management support

Managers and supervisors are widely seen by participants as playing a crucial role in the prevention and management of sexual harassment in retail workplaces, particularly for customer-perpetrated harassment. Some participants spoke very positively about the explicit and "at elbow" support they had received from their direct managers when they had reported sexual harassment incidents perpetrated by customers, with managers' responses ranging from confronting the customer about their inappropriate behaviour, to refusing service, to ordering the customer to leave the store. These managers made it clear to their workers through regular conversations, and their actions, that team members did not have to tolerate inappropriate customer or colleague behaviour, and made sure staff knew what they could do if this occurred. For example, one fashion retail worker commented:

She's [manager's] said from day dot, it's not the customer's always right. It's you're right and we'll back you up 100 per cent. (Ashley, 20, fashion worker)

This explicit managerial support created a workplace culture where it was clear that customer-perpetrated harassment was never tolerated, which in turn meant workers were more confident to personally respond to incidents or report them. Another fashion retail worker described how her manager used to have "one-on-ones" with workers to emphasise that they did not have to put up with disrespectful customer behaviour and what to do if this occurred:

She [manager] really laid it out. She was like, "That's not okay. If there's a customer doing that, tell them to get out and I will back you on that every step of the way." ... That made me feel so empowered to be like, "Okay, if you're going to be disrespectful, I don't have to engage with you and my team and my manager is behind me on that." (Sydney, 19, fashion worker)

Most workers, however, did not feel they would be supported by their managers to respond in this way to customer-perpetrated harassment, or that they would be punished for doing so. These workers said that they wanted to be “backed up” (Natalie, 30, fashion worker; Vanessa, 27, fashion worker) by their managers in the same way that others described. They wanted their managers to take complaints of customer-perpetrated harassment seriously and adequately address them, and commented that managers actively “encouraging” workers (Delilah, 19, intimate apparel store manager) to respond to customer-perpetrated harassment would make them feel supported. This encouragement from managers needed to convey a genuine care for workers’ wellbeing, as one intimate apparel store manager explained:

As much as I know my boss would be like, “If someone was sexually harassing you, say something”, it’s like they make you feel like it would be too awkward to say. It’s just a flippant comment more than it’s like, “No, this is real. You have my support, my encouragement.” Like I say myself, “You tell me, I will ban them. You are important, your safety is important.” (Delilah, 19, intimate apparel store manager)

However, some participants, especially those employed in supermarkets, raised concerns about confronting a customer about inappropriate behaviour, worried the customer may become abusive or violent. Rather than seeking managerial support when these incidents occurred, these participants preferred that organisational preventative measures, such as in-store security, be implemented.

Managers discussed proactively engaging with their staff about these issues and building rapport so that workers felt safe and comfortable to go to managers about incidents when they arose. For example, one second-in-charge to the department manager at a large retail store commented:

I try to make it clear that I am someone that they [workers] can share with, and they can come to. (Samuel, 57, department store manager)

Another retail manager in a small store reported that she independently researched workplace sexual harassment cases and legislation including the recent amendments to the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* (Cth). She then distributed this to staff and discussed it in staff meetings. She reported doing this in an attempt to increase the visibility of the issue in her workplace and encourage reporting:

When I have our staff meetings, I bring this to the forefront, because if I bring it up, and I discuss it openly, then hopefully everyone else can discuss it openly as well. (Ruby, 67, manager)

Participants viewed the authentic engagement of management and senior leaders as playing a critical role in creating a workplace culture where sexual harassment was not tolerated. One supermarket department manager described the way in which this issue needed to be “pushed and driven by any senior management ... with sincerity, consistency” (Brandon, 40, supermarket manager):

It matters if we’re [managers are] driving the stuff, and we’re driving it with sincerity, and other managers and leaders in the store are doing the same thing, and we’re doing it consistently. That’s when the materials that we’re using become real. They become something that people pay attention to. If we say things like, “Alright, you’ve just got to tick this box, don’t worry about it”, if we portray that attitude, then they’ll take it in that attitude. It’s a cultural thing, I think. (Brandon, 40, supermarket manager)

Customer education campaigns

A small number of participants reported that their stores had customer-facing signage or announcements made over the loud-speaker system reminding customers to treat staff with respect but were uncertain whether these had an impact on customer behaviour. When asked whether running customer education campaigns about sexual harassment in the retail industry, a suggestion

made by several key informants, would help prevent customer-perpetrated sexual harassment, participants had mixed opinions. Many felt that advertisements or customer-facing signage would not deter the problem customers who were unlikely to take notice of these: “If people already plan to do it ... they’re not going to see it” (Jemma, 38, fashion manager). Others said these “couldn’t hurt” and were “better than no sign” (Harper, 33, intimate apparel store worker). Participants thought that to be effective, customer education campaigns needed to be backed up by consequences for customers who behaved inappropriately. One worker in an intimate apparel store commented that, in the absence of consequences, these campaigns would not be taken seriously:

If there’s a huge campaign, if there’s no consequences, people aren’t going to take it seriously. (Adeline, 25, intimate apparel worker)

Mandatory reporting requirements

A small number of participants commented that employers should be made “more accountable” (Leonardo, 18, supermarket worker) for sexual harassment incidents in their workplaces and suggested that mandatory reporting requirements from government or industry bodies be implemented to achieve this. They commented that making information about workplace sexual harassment incidents public would force employers to take sexual harassment prevention more seriously, as one fashion retail worker commented:

If you link it to something that’s important to them like their profit levels, then I think there’s more potential to almost force them into caring and taking meaningful action, not just ridiculous buzzwords and statements. (Sydney, 19, fashion worker)

Conclusion

This chapter summarised valuable insights from workers and managers on organisational measures to address workplace sexual harassment. Their perspectives have provided a deeper understanding of the mechanisms in place to prevent such incidents and effectively respond to them when they occur. We have also identified potential interventions that can significantly enhance prevention and responses in the retail industry. These findings contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the issue and provide recommendations for further improvement in organisational and industry-wide practices.

CHAPTER 8

Discussion and recommendations for policy and practice

This research sought to investigate how employees and managers in the Australian retail industry understand, experience and manage sexual harassment at work, aiming to uncover: 1) the prevalence of sexual harassment in the retail industry; 2) the nature of sexual harassment in the retail industry; 3) whether retail workers' experiences of sexual harassment vary by social identity, employment contracts or job contexts; 4) whether current industry policies and practices around the prevention, reporting and management of sexual harassment are adequate; and 5) how retail stakeholders can improve the prevention, reporting and management of sexual harassment in retail workplaces.

This research has shown that workers' experiences of sexual harassment in the retail industry are shaped by a complex and multilayered ecosystem of institutional, industry-wide and organisational factors. At the institutional level, legislative frameworks in relation to employment rights and responsibilities set the terrain in which retail business is conducted, and in which retail work is performed. The way in which institutional arrangements shape employment experiences in retail is influenced by industry-wide dynamics and specificities, including non-stop customer-worker interactions and prevailing norms and practices that privilege customer prerogatives and reward staff deference. Policies and practices at the organisational level also shape workers' experiences of sexual harassment, particularly in relation to the nature of the products sold in retail workplaces and the structures and processes in place to prevent, address or remedy incidents of sexual harassment. The diversity of organisation types in the retail industry, ranging from small retail shops on suburban streets to very large supermarket chains, adds another layer of variegation. Working within this ecosystem are retail workers, a highly heterogeneous group, defined by a complexity of job types, employment contracts and demographic characteristics. In sum, this research demonstrates how the institutional, industry and organisational ecosystem of retail work has created an environment where the experience of sexual harassment is a regular feature of many workers' everyday experience.

These confronting findings provide a nuanced and detailed understanding of the drivers of sexual harassment in retail work which can be used to inform industry-wide strategies for change. In this chapter we highlight 10 key findings, discuss the implications of these findings for policy and practice, and make suggestions for action by retail industry stakeholders. We found the following:

- 1) Retail is a very high-risk industry for sexual harassment and the experience of sexual harassment is pervasive across retail workplaces.
- 2) The risk of experiencing sexual harassment is heightened for particular groups of retail workers.
- 3) Retail workers experience sexual harassment that is perpetrated by managers, peers and customers.
- 4) Customer-perpetrated sexual harassment is a significant problem and is perpetuated and enabled by prevailing industry norms.
- 5) Organisational policy on how to deal with sexual harassment is inconsistent and information is not easy to access or easy to understand.
- 6) Organisational and industry-wide training of workers and managers on sexual harassment is inconsistent, infrequent and poorly targeted.
- 7) Sexual harassment data collection and data analysis is non-standardised, limited and ad hoc and this limits insights in relation to prevalence.
- 8) Complaints and reporting processes are opaque and not trusted by workers, limiting workers' willingness to raise and report experiences of sexual harassment.
- 9) Human resource managers and work health and safety managers are the key "owners" of organisational policies and practices, but they lack the resources they need to adequately address sexual harassment, limiting meaningful action.
- 10) Supervisors and store managers are the "frontline" in dealing with sexual harassment and they need better support to do this work well.

Finding 1: Retail is a very high-risk industry for sexual harassment and the experience of sexual harassment is pervasive across retail workplaces

This research has demonstrated that sexual harassment is pervasive across retail workplaces. Analysis of four survey datasets showed that retail workers are more vulnerable to sexual harassment than workers in most other industries. Senior leaders in retail organisations and senior union and industry association leaders agreed that sexual harassment was a significant risk to retail employees and a critical matter of concern for the stakeholders dealing with it. Retail employees and managers experience sexual harassment so commonly that it is viewed as “just part of the job” and a routine and predictable feature of retail work. Because sexual harassment has such a significant impact on employees’ enjoyment of their work, their safety and wellbeing, and their intention to seek work elsewhere, the incidence and prevalence of sexual harassment should be deeply concerning to retail stakeholders. As retail is a major sector of employment in Australia, the incidence and prevalence of sexual harassment should also be a matter of pressing national concern.

The research shows that, in many retail workplaces, sexual harassment is framed as an occasional, one-off event that occurs between an individual and a perpetrator in isolation. Consequently, existing frameworks to address incidents of sexual harassment are based on individualised systems of reporting and response. Rather, we recommend that retail industry stakeholders acknowledge that sexual harassment is a predictable, systemic and pervasive industry-wide phenomenon, and recognise the unique vulnerabilities of retail workers. Frameworks for preventing and addressing workplace sexual harassment should be as well-developed and embedded in daily workplace practices as current frameworks for other common and preventable workplace hazards and risks. Reframing workplace sexual harassment as a pervasive

and predictable risk would have implications for a range of organisational policies and practices. At a minimum, doing so would impact the work of boards, executive managers, senior managers, specialist managers (such as human resources and work health and safety managers) and store-based supervisors. Reframing sexual harassment in this way may become even more important in the context of the changed legislative context, including an additional national positive duty in relation to sexual harassment wherein employers must adopt a proactive, preventative approach.

The research findings suggest a need for concerted, uniform and industry-wide collaboration to deal with sexual harassment. Industry associations and the major union, who have the capacity to influence and lead across the sector, have a key role to play. Developing leading practice through collaboration would produce more innovative approaches across the industry, effect economies of scale across businesses, produce better coverage of the retail workforce and ultimately respond better to sexual harassment. Common challenges across the entire retail ecosystem that could be addressed in an overarching industry strategy include developing effective and simple reporting mechanisms, driving rigorous data collection, designing and delivering training content, and industry-wide approaches for dealing with dangerous customer behaviour.

We encourage concerted engagement between the retail industry and governments in state and federal jurisdictions in relation to sexual harassment. Government action could focus on understanding what support is needed in the industry from agencies in work health and safety, industrial regulation and discrimination, and whether further policy or legislative change is required to reduce sexual harassment in retail. While this report focuses on retail, there is a clear role for government and public sector bodies in assisting and intervening in other large, highly feminised and youthful labour forces undertaking interactive service work.

Ideas for stakeholder action

We suggest that a Retail Industry Workplace Respect Committee,¹⁰ comprised of key retail leaders and representatives including CEOs, the Australian Retailers Association (ARA), the Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees' Association (SDA), relevant government representatives and representatives of organisations with expertise in prevention of gendered violence, be established. The purpose of the Committee would be to bring the most senior leaders in the retail industry together to collaborate at an industry level on strategies to deal with sexual harassment in retail specifically.

The Committee could play a key role in:

- sharing leading practice across the industry ecosystem, including research and insights that are relevant to all industry stakeholders
- ensuring that agreed approaches are “cascaded” throughout all tiers and lines of management within the industry, including senior managers and executives; specialist managers, such as human resources and work health and safety managers; and line managers, such as department managers and shop floor supervisors
- devising an overarching industry-wide strategy to address sexual harassment, and a harmonised approach in primary prevention, policy design, data collection, the design and delivery of training, and responses to customer-perpetrated sexual harassment
- developing agreement between retail employers, the employer associations and the major union regarding the handling of sexual harassment in policy and industrial instruments
- keeping members informed of key developments in legislation and regulation pertaining to sexual harassment policy, and engagement with governments in relation to future regulatory change.

Finding 2: The risk of experiencing sexual harassment is heightened for particular groups of retail workers

The research shows that retail workers not only experience sexual harassment at higher rates than workers in most other industries, but that certain demographic groups face elevated risk. The findings demonstrate that, as in most workplaces, sexual harassment is an acutely gendered phenomenon with women workers significantly more likely to experience sexual harassment than their male colleagues, and men more likely to be the perpetrators of harassment, as colleagues, managers and customers. Although the men who participated in our study were less likely than their female peers to have had direct personal experience of sexual harassment, they were nonetheless acutely aware of both the prevalence and negative impacts of sexual harassment in their workplaces. In other words, most of the men in our study recognised the scale of the problem and were eager to see it addressed.

Young workers particularly young women, were another group identified as being at high-risk. Many retail employees and managers in our study reported that younger workers were not only more likely than older workers to be targets of sexual harassment, they were also ill-equipped to handle such incidents and less likely to take formal action in response. Workers with disability were identified as a demographic group at relatively higher risk of experiencing sexual harassment in retail settings, along with gay men. Qualitative data shows that heterosexual women – in the role of colleagues and as customers – were common perpetrators in such instances.

New legislative requirements, including the positive duty to eliminate, as far as possible, sexual harassment and related unlawful conduct, heighten the need for a radical overhaul of approaches to sexual harassment risk mitigation in the retail industry. This must include a specific focus on workers identified as being most at risk

¹⁰ This committee is not intended to replicate or replace the current Respect@Work Council. The committee is intended to encourage a leadership role within the retail industry in addressing sexual harassment experienced by employees within retail workplaces only (including sexual harassment by customers). It would be an industry-led body that could interact with and make representations to the council; this interaction would facilitate collaboration without necessitating formal membership to the council. The recommendation to create a committee is not contingent on the continued existence of the council.

of harm and implementation of a consistent industry-wide approach to dealing with sexual harassment. At the organisational level, retail employers have a significant opportunity to improve oversight and reporting of sexual harassment, alongside shop-floor innovations focused on high-risk groups. More research is required to understand the unique experiences of trans women and other LGBTQI+ people, as well as the ways in which harassment may be exacerbated for people experiencing multiple forms of marginality.

Ideas for stakeholder action

To ensure an adequate industry-wide response to workplace sexual harassment in the retail sector, stakeholders must acknowledge and be sensitive to the acute vulnerabilities faced by particular demographic groups.

In this domain, we recommend a range of actions for industry stakeholders, including joint action by employers, the employer association and the union:

- Ensure that deidentified data collection across the sector on sexual harassment is precise in identifying characteristics of targets of sexual harassment (including age, gender, cultural and linguistic status, employment contract type) to ensure precision and risk-based assessment in the design of interventions, policies, and practices.
- Develop strategies targeted to address the specific needs and vulnerabilities of different workforce groups. This might include building worker knowledge about how to recognise sexual harassment, creating multiple avenues for employees to discuss and/or report incidents of sexual harassment, and developing clear and appropriate strategies for workers in these groups to seek assistance and action.
- Develop strategies to prevent and address the sexual harassment of women and LGBTQI+ people within retail work environments. This might include building worker knowledge of the gendered drivers of violence against women and the drivers of violence against LGBTQI+ people, building worker capacity to challenge

these drivers in the workplace, and providing tailored guidance to retailers to support their compliance with the positive duty under the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* (Cth); and relevant state-based frameworks such as work health and safety, anti-discrimination and human rights organisations.

- Consult with and co-design policies and practices with members of high-risk workforce groups to ensure that measures are relevant, suitable, and accessible to these groups.
- Ensure the safety of young workers, especially minors, by:
 - designing specific and targeted approaches to ensure the safety of young and inexperienced workers, especially with respect to onboarding practices, training, team interactions, and supervisor expectations
 - implementing shop-floor innovations such as “buddy systems”, whereby younger workers are partnered and rostered on with an older and/or more experienced worker to provide support and guidance on a range of issues, including sexual harassment. This type of innovation would formalise a role many older, more experienced workers already assume. To be successful, such an initiative would require training for older and/or more experienced “buddies” to ensure that they have both the capability and willingness to provide the necessary support and guidance, if needed. Although such a measure could add rostering complexity and additional costs (to ensure shop-floor buddies are appropriately trained and compensated), it could provide a simple and cost-effective layer of sexual harassment prevention for retail organisations.

Finding 3: Retail workers experience sexual harassment that is perpetrated by managers, peers and customers

This research shows that retail workers experience sexual harassment from a variety of sources – from their peers, managers and customers – but that the experience of harassment is gendered. As noted above, women are significantly more likely than men to experience harassment, and some demographic groups are particularly vulnerable. However, our survey findings show that, when comparing the experiences of men and women who report being targets of sexual harassment in retail work, the perpetrator profile varies. Women were significantly more likely than men to report experiencing harassment from customers: 38 per cent of the harassment experienced by women in retail work was perpetrated by customers compared to 20 per cent for men. Male retail workers, in contrast, were significantly more likely to report experiencing harassment from a manager or someone more senior to them: 46 per cent of the harassment experienced by men was perpetrated by someone more senior to them compared to 30 per cent for women. Indeed, nearly 81 per cent of the harassment experienced by men was perpetrated by a co-worker or manager, compared to 62 per cent for women. Overall women were significantly more likely than men to be targets of sexual harassment at work. However, it remains important for retail employers and stakeholders to recognise that men also experience workplace sexual harassment, and that the perpetrator profile varies by employee gender.

Interviews with specialist managers, such as human resources and work health and safety managers, revealed that many retail employers are aware of the risks posed by employee-perpetrated sexual harassment and customer-perpetrated sexual harassment. However, some specialist managers reported having better capacity and more direct agency to deal with employee-perpetrated harassment compared to customer-perpetrated harassment, which was seen as harder to prevent and control. Many focus group participants noted that the hierarchical power structure of retail workplaces, with men more likely

to be in senior management positions and customers wielding disproportionate power in service interactions, heightened their vulnerability and increased their susceptibility to sexual harassment from “all sides” of the employment relationship.

Ideas for stakeholder action

These findings, combined with the conclusions outlined in Finding 2, suggest the need for a more nuanced and gender-sensitive approach to the prevention and management of workplace sexual harassment in retail.

Some ideas for stakeholder action in this domain include collaboration between employers, employer peak bodies, unions and other key stakeholders on:

- conducting routine and detailed data collection to better understand the employee experience of workplace sexual harassment, common perpetrator profiles, and points and moments of greatest risk
- sharing deidentified data-driven information across the sector to develop a comprehensive and evolving industry-wide understanding of the employee experience of workplace sexual harassment, common perpetrator profiles, and points of greatest risk
- tailoring prevention and response strategies to reflect the “origin” of the experience (e.g. peers, managers or customers).

Finding 4: Customer-perpetrated sexual harassment is a significant problem and is perpetuated and enabled by prevailing industry norms

This research has identified high rates of customer-perpetrated workplace sexual harassment in the retail industry, a phenomenon that is particularly acute for workers in specific types of retail stores. Retail workers reported that although customer-perpetrated harassment was sometimes direct and overt, in the form of inappropriate touching or sexualised comments, it was more frequently experienced in less overt behaviours, such as leering, staring, hovering and other behaviours that made workers feel sexualised and uncomfortable, but which were harder to identify – and therefore report – as workplace sexual harassment. Many workers expressed lack of certainty about whether their almost daily experience of these less overt but nonetheless serious and impactful forms of sexual harassment would be taken seriously by their employers.

Service norms around customer sovereignty were seen by retail workers, and many industry stakeholders, as a significant factor enabling customer-perpetrated harassment. The term “the customer is always right” was evoked by many retail workers to explain the challenges posed by customer interactions. Widely accepted and frequently unquestioned norms such as these give consumers ultimate power in the retail relationship and require employees to display politeness, friendliness and deference to customers. These norms, combined with retail workers’ desire to avoid receiving complaints that might lead to economic consequences (such as lost shifts), can discourage retail employees from directly confronting customers. This dynamic is further reinforced by the way in which harassment is addressed (or not addressed) by retail employers. When managers explicitly signal the need for staff to keep customers happy, or when they do not act on staff reports of harassment, this embeds and reinforces the perception that workers should tolerate harassment. This dynamic robs employees of dignity and agency and creates an ecosystem where sexual harassment can flourish.

In addition to customer service norms, the findings identify industry practices that also place workers at greater risk for customer-perpetrated harassment. Workers selling personal products such as cosmetics, intimate apparel, women’s clothing and jewellery were identified as being especially vulnerable to customer harassment. Workers who are required to wear sexualised uniforms (such as tight or revealing clothing) were also identified as being at greater risk. Working night shifts, working alone, or working without adequate supervision were also found to be key factors increasing worker vulnerability. In focus groups, workers responsible for “closing up” stores or those employed in understaffed contexts saw these as specific risk factors for customer-perpetrated sexual harassment. Other common practices – such as requiring employees to wear name badges – were shown to enable harassing behaviours, such as physical and social media stalking outside of work hours.

Ideas for stakeholder action

The pivotal role of customer service in retail work, and the prevalence of customer-perpetrated workplace sexual harassment, suggest that key stakeholders (employers, employer associations, the major union, and relevant government agencies) need to deploy a sector-wide approach to preventing and addressing customer-perpetrated harassment.

Some ideas for joint stakeholder action by employers, the employer association and the union include the following:

- Employers, the employer association, the major union and appropriate government agencies should collaborate to run an industry-wide campaign educating customers about inappropriate behaviours. Several participants pointed to the “no one deserves a serve” campaign as a successful model.
- Retail employers and the union should develop clear communications to better empower frontline retail workers and shop-floor managers to recognise and respond to inappropriate customer behaviours, in recognition that the customer is not “always right”.

- Retail employers should develop scenario-based training to better equip employees to recognise and respond to customer-perpetrated sexual harassment, with a particular focus on less overt behaviours which many workers found harder to report and deal with.
- Retail employers should enact more strategies to enhance worker safety and to ensure safe staffing levels. Such strategies might include in-store security measures, including installing CCTV cameras in high-risk areas like fitting room entrances, car parks, and “click-and-collect” areas; installing duress alarms and establishing code words to facilitate discreet calls for help; and ensuring in-store security personnel, particularly during high-risk periods such as store closings.

Finding 5: Organisational policy on how to deal with sexual harassment is inconsistent and information is not easy to access or understand

This research shows that, across the retail sector, employer policies on sexual harassment lack consistency, varying from organisation to organisation. Although some employers have very clear policies and procedures for reporting and addressing incidences of sexual harassment, others have less clearly delineated or consistent processes. In some organisations, employee-perpetrated harassment (from colleagues or managers) is dealt with by human resources departments, while customer-perpetrated harassment is channelled to the work health and safety function, with each “type” of harassment having separate channels for reporting and redress. In addition, complaints of harassment are sometimes handled differently by different business lines within organisations. This lack of a uniform approach within and across organisations creates confusion about where and how to raise concerns and causes significant trepidation for workers about how their experiences will be received, handled and addressed.

Across the retail industry, there is inconsistency in organisational communication about sexual harassment policies and procedures, with some employers having

clearly delineated policies which are made readily available to workers via multiple channels and other employers having minimal employee-facing communications about sexual harassment. Many retail workers find it difficult to locate, access and understand organisational policies and processes pertaining to sexual harassment and frequently resort to Google, or other online platforms, for general advice. In the absence of clear organisational communication, workers also turn to the union or to state or federal government departments to access advice, guidance and support. With the advent of new sexual harassment legislation, ensuring clarity around organisational policies and organisational communication is an area that many organisations should urgently address.

Ideas for stakeholder action

The findings suggest an urgent need to create consistency and alignment with respect to sexual harassment policy and policy communication within the retail industry. Echoing previous themes, a whole-of-industry, ecosystem approach is necessary to ensure success.

Ideas for joint stakeholder action by employers, the employer association and the union include the following:

- Establish clear, industry-wide guidelines encompassing definitions, scope, reporting procedures, and consequences for sexual harassment perpetrators.
- Assign clear and unambiguous ownership of the sexual harassment policy area within organisations to ensure a consistent approach, and to reduce uncertainty for workers.
- Ensure that all retail employees have easy access to clear and consistent information about sexual harassment policies and procedures, which are appropriately tailored to the known vulnerabilities and risk profiles of specific demographic groups. This information should be easily accessible and clearly communicated within retail stores and via organisational intranets, apps and/or websites.
- Ensure that any information provided to employees is sensitive and tailored to the known vulnerabilities of specific groups of retail workers, as outlined in Finding 2.

Finding 6: Organisational and industry-wide training of workers and managers on sexual harassment is inconsistent, infrequent and poorly targeted

This research shows that there are significant variations and shortcomings in the quantity, frequency and types of training provided by retail organisations in relation to sexual harassment. Most commonly, the training provided is minimal or inconsistent and it is often delivered as a one-off at induction upon initial employment. Often sexual harassment training is embedded in broader “behaviours and values” discussions rather than as an explicit theme and focus or as a standalone module or training package. Online modules for training were viewed by many research participants as being mostly compliance-focused and disengaging for employees, and thus ineffective. There was little evidence of training for staff on what to do if they witnessed an incident of sexual harassment. A small minority of organisations offer comprehensive and regular training which is reinforced by regular shop-floor conversations between supervisors and team members, as outlined in earlier chapters on research findings.

Ideas for stakeholder action

Training offers retail employers the capacity to equip workers and managers with the knowledge and skills they need to more effectively understand and deal with sexual harassment. In addition to providing and ensuring delivery of regular training, stakeholder action should include the following:

- A tailored approach to employer- and union-delivered training content to suit the unique characteristics of the workplace, job roles and workforce composition, equipping all employees with the necessary tools to effectively combat sexual harassment. Tailored training delivered by employers and unions should:
 - address various potential perpetrators of sexual harassment, including managers, co-workers and customers
 - cover a wide range of scenarios, encompassing different forms of harassment from overt physical contact and verbal comments to less overt forms of harassment, including leering and staring, and also covering incidents occurring outside the workplace (e.g. social media harassment)
 - promote bystander action, encouraging employees to collectively address harassment as allies rather than focusing solely on potential wrongdoers
 - equip managers and supervisors to adequately respond to and prevent sexual harassment incidents
 - build workforce knowledge of the gendered drivers of violence against women, the actions to address the drivers and how these can play out in workplace settings
 - build the capacity of workers, managers and employers to contribute towards the prevention of sexual harassment and violence against women and LGBTQI+ people.
- Regular reinforcement to ensure that employees stay informed and engaged.
- A multi-channel approach, applying both in-person and online methods. While online training is cost-effective and suits the retail industry’s characteristics, periodic interactive, live sessions led by local managers, supervisors or specialist trainers are essential to reinforce and clarify content.
- Regular team conversations in the workplace, initiated by supervisors and managers, fostering ongoing awareness and discussion about preventing sexual harassment.
- A trauma-informed approach in content and delivery, to reflect leading practice.

Finding 7: Sexual harassment data collection and analysis is non-standardised, limited and ad hoc and this limits insights in relation to incidence

The findings show that there is a lack of robust, comparable data being collected within retail organisations to inform action toward effective organisational and industry-wide change. Current data on the incidence and prevalence of sexual harassment in the retail industry is drawn mostly from formal sexual harassment reports or complaints made within organisations, and from anonymous surveys, such as those analysed in this study. There is good reason to believe that these sources, although valuable, may significantly underestimate the scale and scope of sexual harassment owing to the very small proportion of cases that result in formal complaints or proceedings, and because many workers may be unwilling to report experiencing sexual harassment (even in an anonymous survey) due to the associated stigma or shame. Within organisations, data collection on worker experiences of sexual harassment is generally limited, varying from organisation to organisation, and not collected or analysed in a standardised fashion. The lack of robust and standardised data collection at the organisational level poses a major obstacle to identifying and understanding the actual prevalence of sexual harassment across the industry. This makes it difficult to allocate adequate institutional, administrative and specialist resources to address the issue.

Key industry stakeholders, including employers, the employer association and the union, have a significant opportunity both to lead sector-wide change and to provide a model for other industries, by adopting standardised modes and practices of data collection to understand the true incidence of sexual harassment, beyond formal complaints. Rigorous and harmonised data collection would provide a robust evidence base to reveal 'hotspots' in workplaces and workforce groups, to inform targeted action, and to profile risk areas. It could also be used for evaluation purposes, monitoring the impact of

policy interventions at the organisational and industry levels over time. The current individualised nature of workplace sexual harassment reporting, combined with varying degrees of comfort around disclosure owing to the fear of job loss, the fear of retribution, and a lack of faith in the complaints process, suggest that technological innovations, such as apps where workers might quickly alert their employer to an incident and make an anonymous or a formal complaint, could provide one mechanism to collect and store data in real time.

Ideas for stakeholder action

Tangible actions that could be taken to improve organisational and industry-wide data collection include the following:

- Conduct regular organisational and industry-wide surveys to better understand the nature and frequency of worker experiences of sexual harassment and/or include targeted questions on experiences of sexual harassment in employee engagement surveys. The anonymous nature of survey data collection allows targets of sexual harassment to report information about their experiences without perceiving a risk to their safety or reputation. This may build a more robust evidence base to guide action.
- Develop informal and real-time reporting pathways that are easily accessible to employees, possibly through apps. Anonymous surveys conducted by organisations like unions, relevant government agencies or academics can also serve as avenues for understanding the prevalence and nature of sexual harassment within the industry.
- Use data collection methods as a consultative tool, rather than a compliance measure, to enhance understanding of sexual harassment issues, including the types of harassment being experienced and the workforce groups at greatest risk, and to inform organisational and industry-wide responses.

While actions in this domain must involve employers, the employer association and the union, government has an important role to play in resourcing and supporting a tripartite approach to these measures.

Finding 8: Complaints and reporting processes are opaque and not trusted by workers, limiting workers' willingness to raise and report experiences of sexual harassment

This study has shown that many retail workers see the complaint and reporting processes for sexual harassment in their workplaces as confusing or difficult to navigate and, in some cases, not trustworthy. Our analysis of the reporting mechanisms and pathways available in retail organisations showed significant variation in the processes available to employees, and in relation to issues such as the confidentiality of reports. Some organisations had well-defined and easily accessible systems as well as protocols to ensure absolute confidentiality (and in some cases anonymity) for complainants, and provided complainants with explicit protection from retaliation or adverse consequences for making a report. Other organisations, however, had reporting systems and processes that were less clearly defined, were perceived by employees as being more difficult to access, and contained fewer (or no) explicit protections for employees. There were also significant variations in the protocols associated with investigating reported incidents. Many retail workers expressed concern that they did not have a good understanding of the sequence of events should they seek advice or make a complaint, or if an investigation were to occur. They noted that they were not aware of potential consequences for themselves or of perpetrators of such action. In the absence of this knowledge, workers said they were uncertain and felt unsafe when making choices about reporting.

Ideas for stakeholder action

Establishing clear and easily accessible complaint and reporting processes is crucial for organisations to meet their legal obligations to manage and prevent workplace sexual harassment. Some tangible ideas for action by employers, the employer association and the union include the following:

- Establish accessible, confidential, clear and trauma-informed reporting mechanisms for incidents of sexual harassment and provide pathways for workers to identify and escalate factors that may be increasing their risk of experiencing sexual harassment. Such mechanisms should encompass a variety of personnel, such as specialist managers, line managers and unions, to ensure comprehensive reporting possibilities while maintaining confidentiality.
- Set and communicate clear protocols to ensure confidentiality and support for complainants and witnesses and provide employees with explicit protections against retaliation or adverse consequences from raising a report or complaint.
- Improve transparency by providing complainants with clear guidance about how their reports will be managed and their confidentiality safeguarded.
- Improve transparency by clearly communicating the outcomes of investigations and actions taken to address sexual harassment to “close the loop” and promote trust and confidence among employees.

Finding 9: Human resource managers and work health and safety managers are the key “owners” of organisational policies and practices, but they lack the resources they need to adequately address sexual harassment, limiting meaningful action

Specialist managers – including human resources and work health and safety managers – play a crucial role in the prevention, management and control of workplace sexual harassment as the key “owners” of organisational policies and practices. However, this research found that although specialist managers uniformly recognised that sexual harassment is a problem in the retail industry, many lacked the data and resources needed to address the problem. Many of the specialist managers we interviewed were acutely aware of the vulnerabilities of their workers and expressed deep concerns that their organisations were not taking adequate steps to prevent and manage

workplace sexual harassment. Several specialist managers noted that a lack of comprehensive data collection in their organisations clouded their ability to fully understand the nature and incidence of workplace sexual harassment and to develop targeted solutions. Other specialist managers expressed some concern about how divided ownership of sexual harassment matters within their organisations impeded knowledge and, by extension, action on sexual harassment prevention and management. Such views were more prevalent in organisations where ownership of sexual harassment matters was divided by perpetrator type, with employee-perpetrated harassment treated as a human resource issue, and customer-perpetrated harassment handled as a work health and safety concern. Although some specialist managers we interviewed noted they received strong support from their senior executives and board directors, others expressed concern that their senior leaders were less well informed as to the scale and scope of the problem than they should be. Specialist managers expressed some uncertainty about the revised legislative frameworks governing sexual harassment and whether their organisations were adequately prepared to meet these new requirements.

The research identified a mismatch between specialist managers, and retail workers' awareness of the nature of sexual harassment. In interviews, many specialist managers expressed concern that retail workers and shop-floor supervisors lacked rudimentary knowledge of sexual harassment, including how to define, recognise and address such behaviours. However, in focus groups with frontline retail workers and supervisors, it was clear that employees had a thorough, nuanced and detailed understanding of sexual harassment, including for many its legal definition and how to spot harassing behaviours. Nearly every participant in our focus groups could correctly define sexual harassment and clearly understood which types of behaviours would legally classify as sexual harassment. This was particularly true among older workers, and in respect to more overt forms of sexual harassment such as inappropriate touching or sexual comments. However, participants expressed less certainty about how to prevent such behaviours from occurring,

and how to address and/or manage less overt forms of harassment such as leering, staring, hovering, and suggestive (but not necessarily sexual) comments or jokes. This is crucial, as these behaviours were deemed to be the most commonplace and persistent behaviours experienced by retail workers. This finding suggests that specialist managers should focus less attention on developing education and training programs to raise general awareness of sexual harassment, and more attention on empowering employees to prevent, respond to and address both overt and covert forms of harassment.

Ideas for stakeholder action

Specialist managers play a crucial role in dealing with sexual harassment in retail organisations, but our findings show that they lack essential data and resources they need to adequately address this issue.

Employers must take action to ensure the following:

- Specialist managers in retail businesses are not isolated from one another and may benefit from participating in a forum in which to share ideas, seek advice and feedback, and engage in professional development with peers. An industry-wide forum for key specialist management personnel should be established under the auspices of the Retail Industry Workplace Respect Committee, which would provide key benefits such as surfacing tested and effective practices for broader use and fostering collaboration on this very significant industry-wide problem.
- Specialist managers are provided access to better resources and support from senior leaders to prevent and respond to sexual harassment. Boards and executive managers must consult with and seek advice from these managers on their needs and the shortcomings in the organisation's systems and processes, and they must invest to ensure that these needs are met.

Finding 10: Supervisors and store managers are the “frontline” in dealing with sexual harassment and they need better support to do this work well

Retail supervisors are the frontline in dealing with sexual harassment in retail workplaces and their actions can make the difference for team members between a dangerous and unpleasant work environment and a safe and enjoyable one. Some line managers reported that they spent considerable time talking to their team members about sexual harassment, stepping in to assist staff when incidents arose, explaining policies, and dealing with informal and formal complaints about harassment experienced by team members. Leadership by line managers and supervisors was highly valued by workers who reported it made a significant difference to their working life. However, supervisors noted that their work in these areas is poorly recognised and rewarded and that they did not always have the knowledge, support and resources to undertake this work effectively. At the same time, supervisors are also present in the workplaces where their teams work, and they are regularly targets of sexual harassment themselves.

Ideas for stakeholder action

In order to support supervisors in their work to build safe retail workplaces, we recommend the following actions by employers, the employer association and the union:

- Recognising that workers usually report incidents to their direct line manager and that these managers play a critical role in intervening and supporting victims of harassment, they should be equipped with appropriate training and resources to respond effectively to incidents.
- Targeted supervisor training should be developed to build the knowledge of this important group in relation to policy, reporting processes, support for team members and their legal rights and responsibilities. Using realistic and “real world” case studies and ensuring that training sessions are interactive and allow for questioning and discussion are critical.
- Strategies should be put in place to foster and encourage supervisor-led discussion of sexual harassment within retail teams to normalise conversations about this very significant risk and to encourage employees to seek help when they need it.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented the 10 key findings of an innovative mixed method research project on workplace sexual harassment in the Australian retail industry. Despite the importance of this industry as an employer globally, and in Australia, we know little about the dynamics of sexual harassment in retail. The research team adopted an ecosystem approach in the design of the data collection and analysis. The retail ecosystem consists of institutional forces (encompassing the extant legislative framework), industry features (including the norms of the industry and the features of its workforce) and organisational factors (including the design, operation and interaction of policies and practices and the nature of the product being sold).

This research shows that sexual harassment is a predictable and systemic issue within the retail industry, demonstrates that retail workers are at a significantly higher risk of sexual harassment than those in other sectors – so much so that they view sexual harassment as “just another day in retail”. The research also demonstrates there are serious gaps and dissonances in the way that sexual harassment is dealt with in the retail industry.

This chapter has summarised the implications of this research for policy and practice and has provided ideas that stakeholders can take up in order to reduce and better deal with sexual harassment in the retail industry. The implications of these findings for policy and practice are far-reaching. Stakeholders in the retail industry, including employers, industry associations, unions and government agencies, must collaborate to design industry-wide approaches to prevent and address sexual harassment. This includes developing comprehensive frameworks, policies and practices that treat sexual harassment as a serious and preventable risk, similar to the way that other workplace hazards are dealt with in the industry. It also calls for harmonised data collection to provide a robust evidence base for targeted interventions and evaluation

of policy effectiveness. Data collection on sexual harassment incidence must also include the demographic characteristics of sexual harassment targets, to enable greater precision and risk-based assessment in the design of interventions, policies and practices. There is a need to disrupt the normalisation of sexual harassment by customers, peers and more senior staff through industry-wide actions that prioritise employee safety and wellbeing.

Areas for future research

Further research on workplace sexual harassment in the Australian retail industry is warranted. Future studies could explore the effectiveness of industry-wide interventions and initiatives in reducing sexual harassment and improving support for affected workers. Additionally, research could focus on the specific experiences and perspectives of high-risk cohorts, such as young women workers in their first jobs and workers with disability. Mixed findings in the research literature on the relative vulnerability of culturally and linguistically diverse and First Nations workers also points to the urgent need for research focused on the unique workplace dynamics experienced by this cohort and how other demographic factors like age and gender shape risk of sexual harassment. The dynamics of the retail ecosystem, in particular retail industry norms in relation to customer service, must also frame future research agendas. Segmenting worker experience by customer-, peer- or manager-perpetrated harassment will support the design and delivery of better practice. Additional research on workplace location, staffing mix and retail outlet types would also provide valuable insights for targeted prevention efforts. Overall, addressing workplace sexual harassment requires a comprehensive, collaborative and multifaceted approach, and ongoing research is essential to inform evidence-based policy and practice in the Australian retail industry.

Author contributions

Rae Cooper and Elizabeth Hill devised the original research plan and wrote the research questions. Rae Cooper led engagement with and reporting to the research advisory board and engagement about the project with key stakeholders including the union, the major employer association and key employers. Rae Cooper, Elizabeth Hill, Suneha Seetahul and Meraiah Foley contributed to the design of the research. Suneha Seetahul completed the quantitative analysis and Marnie Harris completed the qualitative data collection and analysis. Charlotte Hock was project manager and attended to milestone delivery. All authors (Rae Cooper, Elizabeth Hill, Suneha Seetahul, Meraiah Foley, Marnie Harris, Charlotte Hock and Amy Tapsell) discussed the results and were involved in drafting sections of the report and attending to revisions. Rae Cooper, Elizabeth Hill, Suneha Seetahul, Meraiah Foley, Charlotte Hock and Amy Tapsell responded to peer reviewer comments.

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APPENDIX A:

Advisory board members

Julia Fox	National Assistant Secretary Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees' Association (SDA)
Katie Biddlestone	National Industrial Officer and National Women's Officer, SDA
Claire Neale	Assistant Industrial Officer, SDA
Paul Zahra	CEO, Australian Retailers Association (ARA)
Jason Robertson	Director of Policy, Sustainability and Impact, ARA
Kate Jenkins AO	Sex Discrimination Commissioner
Professor Ariadne Vromen	Sir John Bunting Chair of Public Administration, Crawford School of Public Policy at the Australian National University
Elke Taylor	Senior Policy Officer, Department of Communities Western Australia
Abbey Kendall	Director, Working Women's Centre, South Australia (WWCSA)

Thanks to Abbey Kendall (Director, WWCSA) and Caitlin Feehan (Graduate Lawyer, WWCSA) for their advice on legislative frameworks.

APPENDIX B:

Domestic legislation regulating sexual harassment in Australian workplaces

Act	Legislation and prohibition of sexual harassment	
Sex Discrimination Act 1984 (Cth)	<p>“Under the <i>Sex Discrimination Act</i>, sexual harassment is identified as a unique form of workplace discrimination, which defines sexual harassment as behaviour of a sexual nature that is unwelcome and is offensive, humiliating, or intimidating.”</p>	
	<p>Amendments</p>	
	<p>Anti-Discrimination and Human Rights Legislation Amendment (Respect at Work) Act 2022 (Cth)</p>	<p>The amendment introduced a positive duty on employers and business owners to take “reasonable and proportionate measures to eliminate, as far as possible, discriminatory conduct” that is already made unlawful under the <i>Sex Discrimination Act</i>. The amendment also introduces new powers to the Australian Human Rights Commission to monitor and assess compliance with positive duty from 12 December 2023.</p>
<p>Sex and Age Discrimination Legislation Amendment Act 2011 (Cth)</p>	<p>The amendment stipulated it is unlawful to “sexually harass another person in the course of seeking, or receiving, goods, services or facilities from that other person”. The amendment was designed to increase legal protections for third party-perpetrated sexual harassment, including from customers.</p>	
Fair Work Act 2009 (Cth)	<p>How this Act prohibits sexual harassment</p>	
	<p>The <i>Fair Work Act</i> is the national legislative framework that governs the relationship between employers and employees. This includes regulating National Employment Standards and general protections including protection against adverse action on the basis of a workplace right or on the basis of sex, anti-bullying and protection against unfair dismissal or unlawful termination on the grounds of sex.</p>	
	<p>Amendments</p>	
<p>Fair Work Legislation Amendment (Secure Jobs, Better Pay) Act 2022 (Cth)</p>	<p>The <i>Fair Work Act</i> has been amended to prohibit (or ban) sexual harassment in connection with work, including in the workplace. These changes expand previous protections around sexual harassment in the workplace. They also establish a new dispute resolution process through the Fair Work Commission. These amendments increase protections against workplace sexual harassment and provide workers with a new pathway to resolve sexual harassment complaints.</p>	
Model Work Health and Safety Act	<p>How this Act prohibits sexual harassment</p>	
	<p>Under the model WHS laws, employers have a primary duty of care to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health and safety of their employees. This includes ensuring the physical and psychological health and safety of workers. WHS laws are legislated and regulated separately by state, territory and Commonwealth jurisdictions; however, they are largely standardised through model WHS laws. These have been implemented in every state except Victoria, which has prescribed similar duties and responsibilities under the <i>Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004 (Vic)</i>.</p>	
	<p>Model Work Health and Safety Regulations</p>	<p>The model WHS Regulations have been amended to provide enhanced clarity on the existing requirements to manage psychosocial risks under WHS laws. At the time of writing this report, the majority of states and territories have implemented this change, as has the Commonwealth WHS regulator. This requires employers to manage risks to physical and psychosocial health as far as is reasonably practicable.</p>

How this Act prohibits sexual harassment	
State and territory anti-discrimination laws, together with the <i>Sex Discrimination Act 1984</i> (Cth), provide the primary framework to understand and address sexual harassment as a form of sex discrimination and the right to work in an environment free from sexual harassment.	
State/territory act	How this Act prohibits sexual harassment
Australian Capital Territory - Discrimination Act 1991	Prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex, sexuality and gender identity. Sexual harassment and vilification on the basis of sexuality or gender identity are also prohibited under this Act.
New South Wales - Anti-Discrimination Act 1977	Prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex, homosexuality and transgender status. Sexual harassment or vilification on the basis of homosexuality or transgender status are also prohibited under this Act.
Northern Territory - Anti-Discrimination Act 1992	Prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex and sexuality. Sexual harassment is also prohibited under this Act.
Queensland - Anti-Discrimination Act 1991	Prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex, gender identity and sexuality. Sexual harassment and vilification on the basis of sexuality or gender identity are also prohibited under this Act.
South Australia - Equal Opportunity Act 1984	Prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex, chosen gender and sexuality. Sexual harassment is also prohibited under this Act.
Tasmania - Anti-Discrimination Act 1998	Prohibits discrimination on the basis of gender, gender identity, intersex status and sexual orientation. Sexual harassment and incitement of hatred on the basis of sexual orientation are also prohibited under this Act.
Victoria - Equal Opportunity Act 2010	Prohibits discrimination on the basis of gender identity, sex and sexual orientation. Sexual harassment is also prohibited under this Act.
Western Australia - Equal Opportunity Act 1984	Prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex, sexual orientation and gender history. Sexual harassment is also prohibited under this Act.

State and territory anti-discrimination laws

APPENDIX C:

Sexual harassment and retail: Key sources

Authors	Origin	Aims	Discipline	Design and sample	Findings
Brown (2020)	United States	To explore the varying experiences of workers aged 15-17 and 18-24 and their understandings of workplace violence, including sexual harassment and physical assault	Sociology, work and organisational studies	Qualitative; focus groups (n = 31) Retail, food services, arts and entertainment	Findings indicate that slightly older workers can experience more severe forms of sexual harassment and physical assault than younger workers. Older workers reported using formal mechanisms and noted a preoccupation with customer service norms. Young workers more regularly reported to their parents. Across all ages workers experienced negative impacts on mental health
Gettman and Gelfand (2007)	United States	To test a model of antecedents and consequences of sexual harassment by clients and customers	Psychology	Mixed method (qualitative interviews and survey data) Professional women (n = 394) and retail workers (n = 3,445)	Study one (professional women): Customer and client sexual harassment was linked to contextual factors such as client power and gender composition of the client base Study two (retail workers): Customer-perpetrated sexual harassment led to lower job satisfaction
Good and Cooper (2014)	Australia	To examine how workers respond to sexual harassment from customers in the workplace and why	Work and organisational studies	Qualitative; interviews (n = 10) University students working in retail or hospitality	Workers face difficulty responding to customer-perpetrated sexual harassment due to the constraints of the workplace and social norms. Silence was the dominant response from workers, while others used informal voice and other informal coping strategies
Good and Cooper (2016)	Australia	To examine how workers respond to sexual harassment from customers in the workplace and why	Work and organisational studies	Qualitative; interviews (n = 15) University students working in retail or hospitality	Workers in the service sector are constrained due to social norms and insecure working conditions, which led workers to use informal coping mechanism to respond to sexual harassment
Handy (2006)	New Zealand	To investigate women's experiences of sexual harassment across three organisations - meatworks, retail and banking	Work and organisational studies	Qualitative; interviews (n = 13) Women working in meatworks (n = 3), retail (n = 4) and banking (n = 6)	Women in retail had a range of collective coping strategies which shaped their view of sexual harassment from co-workers and customers
Hughes and Tadic (1998)	Canada	To explore the nature, prevalence and consequences of customer-perpetrated sexual harassment among women working in retail	Work and organisational studies	Quantitative; survey (n = 83) Retail workers (n = 63) and security guards (n = 20)	Findings indicate customer-perpetrated sexual harassment is a significant issue. Women workers are constrained in their response to this behaviour due to workplace norms, including customer service requirements. Indirect responses, such as ignoring male customers, could impact job performance

Authors	Origin	Aims	Discipline	Design and sample	Findings
Leslie and Hauck (2005)	United States	To replicate Workman's 1993 article "Extent and nature of sexual harassment in the fashion retail workplace"		Quantitative; survey (n = 144) Women in fashion retailing	The majority of workers experienced sexual harassment, which was consistent with Workman's 1993 study. Overall, this study revealed few changes in the nature of workplace sexual harassment over the 10-year period
Runyun et al. (2004)	United States	To examine the working conditions of teenagers in five sites, examining the presence of factors associated with workplace violence and considering workers' concerns about safety and training to deal with violent circumstances	Sociology, health	Mixed method; telephone interviews and survey data (n = 396) Young workers aged 14-17 in retail	Teenage retail workers are subject to a range of unsafe working conditions such as working alone, at night and without supervision. Despite this they are often unconcerned about safety, indicating training is insufficient
Tindell and Padavic (2022)	United States	To explore low-wage women's experiences of workplace incivilities, including sexual harassment	Sociology	Qualitative; in-depth interviews (n = 18) Women in low-wage work including retail (n = 5), fast food (n = 4), banking or service (n = 3) and the arts (n = 1)	Incivilities were primarily perpetrated by supervisors, followed by customers and then co-workers. Customer and co-worker perpetrators were largely men, while among supervisors, women were the main perpetrators. The type of incivility varied depending on role: co-workers were far more likely to engage in sexual harassment, which was virtually nonexistent among supervisors. Targets of sexual harassment experienced impacts on mental health and income
Walker et al. (2019)	Australia	To build on existing research into sexual harassment in a retail environment by adding the perspectives of managers/employers and lawyers to describe the major social and legal variables that impede disclosure and legal remedies in customer-perpetrated sexual harassment	Legal studies	Mixed method; survey and open-ended qualitative responses (n = 26) Retail store managers/employers (n = 26) and lawyers (n = 18)	There is a lack of awareness by retail management on the nature of customer-perpetrated sexual harassment, compounded by a lack of understanding, policies and/or training. Employers may be legally responsible for sexual harassment perpetrated by customers if they have not implemented measures to prevent sexual harassment
Workman (1993)	United States	To clarify the nature and extent of workplace sexual harassment in fashion retailing	Social science	Quantitative; survey (n = 132) Women fashion retail workers	There is a prevalence of sexually harassing behaviour experienced by fashion retail workers, however the behaviour was not often labelled as such. More frequently reported incidents were gender harassment or seductive behaviour. Methods of coping included ignoring the incident, avoiding the perpetrator or asking the person to stop the behaviour

APPENDIX D:

Regression analysis: Description and full results table

The regression analysis conducted in this study uses logistic models to estimate the correlation between a set of sociodemographic variables and the experience of sexual harassment at work. Equation 1 describes the estimation method.

$$SH_experience = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{gender} + \beta_2 \text{age} + \beta_3 \text{CALD} + \beta_4 \text{AboriginalTorres} + \beta_5 \text{sexualorientation} + \beta_6 \text{disability} + \beta_7 \text{industry} + \beta_8 \text{union} + \beta_9 \text{workstatus} + \beta_{10} \text{income} + \beta_{11} \text{highschool} + \epsilon$$

The results presented in the table therefore help describe the targets of sexual harassment in the retail industry. A positive coefficient indicates that the given variable is positively correlated to the experience of sexual harassment and, conversely, a negative coefficient indicates that a given variable is negatively correlated to the experience of sexual harassment. Only variables that are significant are interpreted, represented by the following symbols: * (10% significance level), ** (5% significance level) and *** (1% significance level).

Variables	Whole sample	Men	Women
Women	1.185*** (0.220)		
Age	-0.0305*** (0.00768)	-0.0176 (0.0138)	-0.0353*** (0.00969)
CALD	0.0313 (0.197)	-0.231 (0.463)	0.119 (0.227)
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples	0.519 (0.418)	1.582** (0.650)	-0.403 (0.542)
Person identifying as not heterosexual	0.517** (0.238)	0.537 (0.516)	0.378 (0.287)
Person with disability	0.695*** (0.226)	0.731 (0.513)	0.692*** (0.261)
Industry (ref. financial services)			
Marketing	-0.141 (0.508)	-0.482 (1.064)	-0.114 (0.619)
Automotive	-0.395 (0.700)	-1.001 (1.374)	0.0170 (0.898)
Retail	0.385 (0.312)	0.676 (0.552)	0.250 (0.386)
Wholesale	0.505 (0.365)	1.294* (0.662)	0.205 (0.467)
Food and beverages	1.145*** (0.328)	2.525*** (0.658)	0.716* (0.392)

Work location (ref. in a store)			
Restaurant	-0.277 (0.309)	-0.965 (0.693)	-0.0865 (0.346)
Head office	-0.111 (0.328)	-0.333 (0.636)	-0.0967 (0.397)
Warehouse	-0.200 (0.387)	-1.604* (0.818)	0.278 (0.464)
Other	-0.0909 (0.369)		0.424 (0.411)
Union member	0.296 (0.258)	1.005** (0.470)	-0.0523 (0.314)
Work status (ref. full-time)			
Part-time	-0.266 (0.268)	0.0352 (0.523)	-0.399 (0.316)
Casual worker	-0.346 (0.304)	0.738 (0.702)	-0.565 (0.346)
Short-term contract	0.911 (0.836)		1.621 (1.058)
Freelancer/gig worker	-0.361 (0.972)		
Annual income group (ref. less than \$15k)			
\$15k-25k	-0.409 (0.358)	-0.736 (1.122)	-0.353 (0.389)
\$20k-40k	0.113 (0.339)	0.108 (0.988)	0.162 (0.362)
\$40k-60k	0.111 (0.359)	0.967 (0.917)	-0.00957 (0.401)
\$60k-80k	0.108 (0.417)	-0.138 (1.087)	0.340 (0.478)
\$80k-100k	-0.229 (0.477)	0.434 (1.013)	-0.704 (0.637)
\$100k-150k	-0.124 (0.547)	0.0757 (1.262)	0.0688 (0.677)
More than \$150k	0.358 (0.716)	1.051 (1.211)	-0.169 (1.247)
Year 12 of high school and below	-0.550*** (0.200)	-0.898 (0.545)	-0.439* (0.226)
Constant	-1.803*** (0.582)	-3.224** (1.362)	-0.193 (0.703)
Observations	994	343	595

Source: Authors' calculations from Designing Gender Equality into the Future of Work (2021) dataset. Results of logistic regressions. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$. The total number of observations is 994. Note that 56 observations were dropped because of collinearity in the male sample.

■ Significant coefficients

APPENDIX E:

Descriptive statistics of regression variables

Variable	% of sample/mean
Women	58.76
Age	35.15
CALD	62.04
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples	4.74
Person identifying as not heterosexual	14.65
Person with disability	18.48
Industry	
Financial services	3.05
Marketing	3.25
Automotive	1.84
Retail	59.03
Wholesale	15.17
Food and beverages	35.93
Work location	
In a store	42.11
Restaurant	26.48
Head office	11.59
Warehouse	10.28
Other	9.54
Union member	13.84
Work status	
Full-time	40.17
Part-time	31.73
Casual employee	26.91
Short-term contract	0.59
Freelancer/gig worker	0.60
Annual income group	
Less than \$15k	13.43
\$15k-25k	14.15
\$25k-40k	19.78
\$40k-60k	22.92
\$60k-80k	14.20
\$80k-100k	8.21
\$100k-150k	5.89
More than \$150k	1.42
Year 12 of high school and below	45.56

ANROWS

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