

Migrant and refugee women: A national study of experiences of, understandings of and responses to sexual harassment in the workplace

This is an ANROWS summary of the research report *Migrant and Refugee Women: A National Study of Experiences of, Understandings of and Responses to Sexual Harassment in the Workplace* (2024).

Context

- This report presents the findings of research on migrant and refugee women's attitudes about, experiences of and responses to workplace sexual harassment. This research is the first comprehensive study of these issues nationally and internationally. It marks an important shift in undertaking comprehensive research that captures women's experiences of safety in the workplace.
- Existing evidence suggests that disempowerment and power imbalances, such as those related to race, gender, disability or sexuality, can amplify the impacts of workplace sexual harassment. Simultaneously, power imbalances can conceal both the harassment itself as well as those impacts.
- Despite this, there is limited evidence on migrant and refugee women's experiences of sexual harassment that would help to inform prevention and response in both policy and practice.
- The first report from this project, released in 2023, surveyed 701 women who identified as migrant or refugee and found that 46 per cent of respondents had experienced workplace sexual harassment (Segrave et al., 2023, pp. 23-25).
- This final report from the project brings together the survey data with the qualitative phase of the study, which involved focus group discussions with 155 migrant and refugee women across Australia and 25 stakeholder interviews. While the findings from this report are not generalisable, they offer important insights into migrant and refugee women's experiences of safety in the workplace.

Key findings

For migrant and refugee women, workplace sexual harassment was consistently experienced alongside exploitative work conditions and/or racial discrimination

- The intersecting of various forms of workplace harms – exploitative work conditions, sexual harassment and racial discrimination – suggests that siloed responses to these harms are ineffective.

Understandings and perceptions of workplace sexual harassment

Women in this study were uncertain about what "counts" as workplace sexual harassment

- Women consistently reported feeling unsafe or uncomfortable in the workplace – they referred to how a behaviour made them feel, rather than referencing formal definitions.

- Women spoke about a range of factors that might influence how behaviour is defined and experienced – including that at times their discomfort reflected their own standards and expectations, and at other times there was doubt or uncertainty regarding what was unacceptable by Australian legal or policy standards.
 - This was especially so for newly arrived migrants.

Experiences of sexual harassment in the workplace

Workplace sexual harassment was consistently experienced alongside exploitative work conditions

- Widespread experiences – and normalisation – of unequal pay, or general lack of physical or psychological safety, created environments in which sexual harassment was able to thrive. Workplace sexual harassment was viewed as an extension of other unsafe work practices, rather than as a practice that disrupted an otherwise “safe” or “secure” workplace.

Regardless of industry, education or employment status, racism – both overt and implicit – was part of women’s experiences of work

- This included the way that myths and assumptions about sexuality and gender (for example, sexual and racial myths regarding women from specific backgrounds) featured in women’s experiences of discrimination and workplace sexual harassment.

Women reported that perpetrators exploited power and displayed entitlement – but the nature of this power and entitlement was complex

- Men were most frequently the harassers and were most often in senior positions or were clients or customers.
 - The power imbalances inherent in those gender and workplace positions impacted whether and how women disclosed experiences of being unsafe. This challenges the assumption that simply affirming particular behaviours as being sexual harassment is a key way to support women to report.
- In some instances, where perpetrators and victims and survivors shared a religious or ethnic background, this was leveraged by perpetrators to exercise power, often with impunity, because they weaponised culturally grounded beliefs or standards that were not understood by others.
- Similarly, many women spoke about the ways in which perpetrators targeted them because they knew that the consequences for women speaking out would be felt far beyond the workplace and have potentially very negative impacts on their family and community standing.

Women’s responses to sexual harassment

Having and keeping a job were top priorities for women in this study

- Decisions about responses and seeking help were based on the need to remain in paid work and to maintain a positive reputation for future employment.
 - This was especially so for temporary visa holders, who do not have access to the welfare safety net if they need to leave the workplace/find alternative employment.

Women were made to feel responsible when those around them inferred that they were misinterpreting behaviour because they did not understand Australian culture and/or were unable to recognise or “take a joke”

- Women reported that behaviours felt intentional and targeted, but that perpetrators acted as if it was unintentional or misunderstood, which could enable the behaviour to be dismissed.
- Other colleagues often affirmed the behaviour through non-response or laughing along and/or suggesting that women were taking behaviour that was in jest too seriously. Often this was framed around “Australian culture”, and women were made to feel that they misunderstood “the joke”.

Women rarely filed a formal complaint or disclosed workplace sexual harassment to their workplace (or to an external body such as the Fair Work Ombudsman)

The key reasons for this were:

- women were not sure what to do
- formal mechanisms were not perceived to be practical or accessible
- women held concerns about the impact on their employment and visa security
- women had witnessed other complaints result in little or no action (this is explored further below)
- women experienced intersecting unsafe workplace behaviours and were not confident these would be understood or recognised
- women perceived a lack of supportive culture in the workplace
- a lack of gender and racial representation in upper management
- for those who were closely connected to a faith or cultural community, shame and the impact of standing up against workplace sexual harassment was weighed up against the impact for them and their families outside of the workplace.

Women took action to respond to workplace sexual harassment in various ways - most of which meant further or ongoing negative impacts for their wellbeing

- Women managed their safety in four key ways:
 - resigning and/or leaving the workplace
 - ignoring the behaviour (because of perceptions that the behaviour wasn't serious, or that it was easier to ignore than do something formal, or because of the wider normalisation of gender discrimination and harassment, which left women having to "choose which battles to fight")
 - actively taking measures to protect themselves from unsafe situations
 - directly confronting the perpetrator.
- The high numbers of women who responded by leaving the workplace points to the need to consider women's employment movement and why women leave workplaces.

Workplace responses to sexual harassment

Workplaces rarely took formal action in response to disclosures

- Women observed that most often if action was taken, it was that the perpetrator or complainant was simply moved around in the organisation. There was no formal recognition of the perpetrator's wrongdoing or that it was potentially unlawful. This has serious impacts for the women affected and for women more broadly who do not see any recognition of unacceptable workplace behaviour.
- Those in senior positions often responded to harassment by reinforcing that it was a woman's responsibility to avoid it (rather than challenging the behaviour/perpetrator).

Key practice and policy recommendations

Actions for government

- Reduce the siloes across different policy areas that seek to address various forms of workplace harm for migrant and refugee women (for example, migration law and policy, employment law and regulation, discrimination law, criminal justice).
- Evaluate, redevelop and better align the existing reporting mechanisms that are spread across the multiple bodies that currently respond to aspects of unsafe or exploitative work practices (including labour exploitation, wage theft, discrimination and workplace sexual harassment). Pursuing complaints through multiple channels creates further stress for women experiencing unsafe work.
- Invest in safe work services external to employers that can ensure culturally responsive approaches for working women in every state and territory. These need to be broad in their remit and could, for example, provide information about women's rights at work and provide referral pathways for support. They should be available to all regardless of visa status.
- Consider expanding positive duty obligations to other forms of discrimination to ensure active efforts to shift workplace culture.

Actions for industry bodies

- Tailor industry-specific approaches to address workplace sexual harassment. The conditions required to make a workplace safe vary because of different job requirements.

Actions for workplaces

- Emphasise proactive and transparent action in response to workplace sexual harassment that ensures women can remain employed and their career progression unimpacted - including anonymity in reporting and a review of the use of non-disclosure agreements.
- Extend exit interviews and complaints timelines to capture longer periods following cessation of employment so that women have the opportunity to report once they feel safe in another job or have citizenship or permanent residency.
- Consider implementing mechanisms that would allow feedback across systems (for example, if women are only reporting workplace sexual harassment once they have citizenship or permanent residency, this is indicative that the migration system has a role to play in better supporting non-citizen workers' safety in the workplace).

Links to existing ANROWS research

[Understanding and addressing sexual harassment in the Australian retail sector](#)

Crossover with this study includes:

- women, particularly in the context of casualised or low-skilled work (requiring no or limited formal qualifications), speaking of the absence of formal training or information
- harassment in the hospitality, care and retail industries being so frequent/normalised that it was nearly an expected part of the job
- women experiencing harassment from clients and customers in retail settings
- women being unsure whether unsafe/unacceptable behaviours, particularly non-physical behaviours, “counted” as workplace sexual harassment.

[Technology-facilitated sexual harassment in the workplace: Perpetration, responses and prevention](#)

Crossover with this study includes:

- women questioning whether harassment via technology was “really” harassment
- workplaces commonly using apps and other technology that people have on their personal phones, blurring the boundaries of where a workplace begins and ends
- the pervasiveness of technology as a mechanism of harassment. The first Segrave report (based on the survey, released in 2023) spoke to this in particular.

[Sexual harassment of LGBTQ young people in the workplace and workplace training](#)

- While gender, not sexual orientation, was seen by women in the focus groups in Segrave as the core driver of workplace sexual harassment, a range of experiences were described that evidenced specific efforts to undermine women, to make them uncomfortable, and to be sexually explicit in a way that targeted their sexuality when they were identified as LGBTQ.

REPORT NUMBER	NAME	SUGGESTED CITATION	DATE PUBLISHED
Research report 1	<i>Migrant and refugee women in Australia: A study of sexual harassment in the workplace</i>	Segrave, M., Wickes, R., Keel, C., & Tan, S. J. (2023). <i>Migrant and refugee women in Australia: A study of sexual harassment in the workplace</i> (Research report, 06/2023). ANROWS. https://www.anrows.org.au/publication/migrant-and-refugee-women-in-australia-a-study-of-sexual-harassment-in-the-workplace/	29 August 2023
Technical report	<i>Technical report for migrant and refugee women in Australia: A study of sexual harassment in the workplace</i>	Keel, C., Wickes, R., Cherkesly, I., Segrave, M., & Tan, S. J. (2023). <i>Technical report for migrant and refugee women in Australia: A study of sexual harassment in the workplace</i> (ANROWS Insights, 03/2023). ANROWS. https://www.anrows.org.au/publication/technical-report-migrant-and-refugee-women-in-australia-a-study-of-sexual-harassment-in-the-workplace/	29 August 2023
Research report 2	<i>Migrant and refugee women: A national study of experiences of, understandings of and responses to sexual harassment in the workplace</i>	Segrave, M., Tan, S. J., Wickes, R., Keel, C., & Alarcón Lopez, N. (2024). <i>Migrant and refugee women: A national study of experiences of, understandings of and responses to sexual harassment in the workplace</i> (Research report, 07/2024). ANROWS.	20 August 2024

STATUS OF PROJECT: **Complete**

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REFERENCES

Segrave, M., Wickes, R., Keel, C., & Tan, S. J. (2023). *Migrant and refugee women in Australia: A study of sexual harassment in the workplace* (Research report, 06/2023). ANROWS. <https://www.anrows.org.au/publication/migrant-and-refugee-women-in-australia-a-study-of-sexual-harassment-in-the-workplace/>

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