

#SPEAKINGOUT@WORK:

Sexual harassment of LGBTQ young people in the workplace and workplace training

This is an ANROWS summary of the research report *#SpeakingOut@Work: Sexual harassment of LGBTQ young people in the workplace and workplace training* (2024).

CONTEXT

- LGBTQ people are often overlooked in workplace sexual harassment research and policy discussions, which typically focus on cisgender heterosexual women, despite studies showing harassment is equally experienced by LGBTQ individuals.
- LGBTQ young people face increased marginalisation targeting their identity and age (alongside other factors like disability, Indigeneity and ethnicity) exacerbating the harms of sexual harassment. Despite this, we know very little about their experiences.
- This report brings together data and participant reflection from a national survey of over 1,000 participants, in-depth interviews, and a photography exercise where participants shared images representing their experiences of workplace sexual harassment. Participants across all three components were LGBTQ young people aged 14 to 30 years old.
- It addresses a significant knowledge gap and will be crucial for informing workplace policy and practice specific to LGBTQ young people.

KEY FINDINGS

Experiences of sexual harassment

77 per cent of LGBTQ young people surveyed had experienced workplace sexual harassment.

LGBTQ young people experienced workplace sexual harassment as part of a continuum of interconnected experiences of violence underpinned by homophobia, biphobia and transphobia.

Young people often faced workplace sexual harassment that was directly connected to their LGBTQ identities.

- Most LGBTQ young people reported that they felt targeted for workplace sexual harassment due to their gender, age and sexual orientation.
- Harassment targeting LGBTQ young people is shaped by anti-LGBTQ prejudice; curiosity and entitlement to details of LGBTQ people's identities, bodies and relationships; fetishisation and sexualisation; and the portrayal of LGBTQ people as predators.
- Common forms of harassment include sexually suggestive or explicit comments, intrusive questions about their private lives, unwelcome sexual jokes about their LGBTQ identities, and comments about their sex lives.
- Binary and non-binary transgender participants faced more intrusive comments about their anatomy than cisgender participants.
- People who were presumed female at birth were more likely to have experienced comments about "correcting" their LGBTQ identity through sexual assault (for example, someone suggesting that sex with someone of the opposite sex will make you straight) compared to participants presumed male at birth.

- Over 30 per cent (32%) of participants who had experienced workplace sexual harassment felt pressured to remain closeted.

Most perpetrators were men who acted alone.

- Participants reported that most perpetrators were young (20-29 years of age).
- Most commonly, perpetrators were reported to be a co-worker of the same level as participants (46%), followed by a client or customer (31%).
- A few (7.6%) LGBTQ young people reported experiencing workplace sexual harassment from LGBTQ perpetrators.

Some LGBTQ young people experienced behaviours they felt were inappropriate, unwelcome and targeted them based on their sex, gender or sexuality yet were often unsure if their experiences counted as sexual harassment.

- Although some LGBTQ young people (17%) initially said they had not experienced workplace sexual harassment, they did report experiencing specific behaviours, such as intrusive questions about their private life, that do count as sexual harassment.
- It can be hard for LGBTQ young people to separate sexual harassment from homophobic, biphobic and transphobic actions, as these behaviours are so closely linked in their workplace experiences.
- Uncertainties about what counts as workplace sexual harassment were often based on perceiving workplace sexual harassment within “traditional” heteronormative cisgender stereotypes. For example, “I traditionally would always think about gross white men in their sixties and stuff, who are slapping you on the butt and that sort of thing.”
- Some younger participants “did not have a frame of reference for what was normal” and thus “in the moment ... had no idea what was happening”.
- LGBTQ young people generally had limited awareness of workplace sexual harassment policies and reporting pathways in their workplaces.

Workplace sexual harassment took a toll on LGBTQ young people’s mental and physical wellbeing and impacted their work and personal lives.

- For some transgender young people, workplace sexual harassment experiences could have the additional impact of inducing gender dysphoria.
- Sexual harassment from cis heterosexual perpetrators that specifically targeted participants’ LGBTQ identity through intrusive and often sexually explicit jokes, comments and questions could evoke feelings of shame, objectification, alienation, and internalised homophobia, biphobia and transphobia.

Culturally unsafe and non-inclusive workplaces where transphobia, homophobia and biphobia thrive foster workplace sexual harassment.

- Workplace infrastructure, practices and environments (for example, a lack of gender-neutral bathrooms, uniform policies, not using chosen names or pronouns, isolated rooms and dark car parks) create opportunities for sexual harassment and other forms of violence.
- LGBTQ young people were often required to educate their co-workers and managers about their LGBTQ identities, which was taxing and considered additional emotional labour.
- The presence of other openly LGBTQ people was instrumental in making participants feel that a workplace was safe and inclusive, as it implied the workplace was accepting of LGBTQ identities.

Reporting workplace sexual harassment

Most LGBTQ young people chose not to make a formal report and often chose instead to leave their jobs.

- Some participants identified that making a report would require them to come out in a potentially unsafe environment.
- Participants often reported a lack of trust in employers and systems based on personal and/or colleagues’ experiences of managers failing to intervene appropriately in their claims. This was a barrier to making a report or seeking support.

- Many workers, especially those in accommodation and food services, had to tolerate sexual harassment from clients or customers because their employers expected them to be “presentable”, “professional” and “polished” – meaning “straight and simple” – and because they feared losing their job or tips.

Informal emotional and practical support from close co-workers was the most helpful.

- Many participants’ positive feelings about the support from co-workers centred on their experiences of being validated: “It was overwhelming to be affirmed; to me, it felt like enough support to have someone tell me that what I had experienced was awful and not okay.”

Workplace sexual harassment training

LGBTQ young people often reported receiving minimal or no training on workplace sexual harassment.

- Overwhelmingly, those who had received workplace sexual harassment training said it was an unhelpful, tick-the-box exercise and was inappropriately pitched for LGBTQ young people due to its cisheteronormative focus.
- Those who had positive experiences of training reported that the training was comprehensive, inclusive of LGBTQ people, interactive, face-to-face, facilitated by an expert, and addressed prevalence, workplace rights, and definitions including grey areas, complexities and nuances of workplace sexual harassment.

KEY PRACTICE AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for government

- Invest in a national public anti-sexual harassment campaign that targets the workplace, education, health and sports.
- Improve employers’ and employees’ literacy on workplace sexual harassment, that includes training on the experiences and needs of LGBTQ young people.
- Review and improve workplace safety and security for casual, part-time and short-term contract workers, of whom many are LGBTQ young people.

Recommendations for business owners and workplace managers

- Ensure workplace safety and inclusion of LGBTQ young employees.
- Review and evaluate sexual harassment policies, reporting procedures and training, with a focus on the inclusion of addressing LGBTQ employees’ experiences and needs.
- Incorporate information on workplace sexual harassment at workplace inductions for all employees, including casual, part-time and short-term contract workers; and ensure these workers have access to this information on the workplace intranet.
- Address the workplace sexual harassment experienced by young employees, including LGBTQ young people, from clients and customers.

Recommendations for education sectors – Schools, universities, professional training institutions

- Review and address gaps in sexual harassment policies, reporting procedures and training across all school and post-school education sectors.
- Include anti-sexual harassment education through the Respectful Relationships Education in Schools (RREiS) program from primary through to secondary schools.

[Cooper et al.: Understanding and addressing sexual harassment in the Australian retail sector](#)

- Across the Cooper et al. and Robinson et al. studies, participants spoke about the absence of, or limited utility of, formal training and information about sexual harassment.
- Harassment in the hospitality, care and retail industries was described as so normalised that it was nearly an expected part of the job. In the present study, LGBTQ young people spoke similarly about sexual harassment at work.
- Experiencing harassment from clients and customers in retail settings was common across both studies.
- Participants in both studies were unsure whether unsafe/unacceptable behaviours “counted” as workplace sexual harassment. This was also a common theme in the migrant and refugee women’s experiences of workplace sexual harassment study discussed below.

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

- The technology-facilitated workplace sexual harassment study argued that a safety lens needs to be used for policies and practices within the workplace, for example, for tech and HR policies that reveal personal details about staff. This resonates with findings from the present study with LGBTQ young people talking about being “outed” or misgendered via workplace systems.

[Segrave et al.: Migrant and refugee women’s attitudes, experiences and responses to sexual harassment in the workplace](#)

- Migrant and refugee women (Segrave et al.) and LGBTQ young people (Robinson et al.) described experiencing specific efforts to undermine them and to make them uncomfortable.
- Many LGBTQ young people (Robinson et al.) and migrant and refugee women (Segrave et al.) encountered culturally unsafe and non-inclusive workplaces. That is, workplace sexual harassment was an extension of an already unsafe space.
- Participants in both studies commonly spoke about how they felt in response to experiences of sexual harassment, for example, that they felt uncomfortable, rather than that it constituted sexual harassment.

| REPORT NUMBER | NAME | SUGGESTED CITATION | DATE PUBLISHED |
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| Research report 1 | #SpeakingOut@Work: Sexual harassment of LGBTQ young people in the workplace and workplace training | Robinson, K. H., Allison, K., Jackson, E. F., Davies, C., Smith, E. K., Hawkey, A., Ussher, J., Ullman, J., Marjadi, B., & Byron, P. (2024). <i>#SpeakingOut@Work: Sexual harassment of LGBTQ young people in the workplace and workplace training</i> (Research report, 10/2024). ANROWS. | 3 December 2024 |

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