



What the evidence tells us: Insights from ANROWS' sexual harassment research program

Between 2021-2024 ANROWS commissioned a series of research projects on workplace sexual harassment. These projects were:

- The '[Retail Project](#)', which examined how employees and managers in the Australian retail sector understand, experience and manage sexual harassment at work.
- The '[#SpeakingOut@Work Project](#)', which investigated sexual harassment experienced by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) young people (aged 14 to 30) in the workplace and in workplace training.
- The '[WTFSH Project](#)', which studied the behaviours, characteristics and specific drivers of workplace technology facilitated sexual harassment, focusing on young people and women.
- The '[Migrant and Refugee Women Project](#)', which looked at migrant and refugee women's experiences, understandings of and responses to sexual harassment.



What did we find?

"Ultimately [workplace] sexual harassment is about power, isn't it?"

(Participant, Migrant and Refugee Women Project)

Workplace sexual harassment is common, and experienced at disproportionate rates by some cohorts.

An investigation by the Australian Human Rights Commission found that **1 in 3** individuals experienced workplace sexual harassment (WSH) between 2017-2022. ANROWS' projects have built on this evidence, showing that some cohorts experience WSH at disproportionately high rates:

- Women experienced WSH at rates higher than men across all the studies.
- 77 per cent of LGBTQ young people surveyed in the #SpeakoutOut@Work Project had experienced workplace sexual harassment.
- 46 per cent of women surveyed for the Migrant and Refugee Women Project experienced at least one form of sexual harassment in the previous five years.
- The Retail Project found that in addition to young women, other groups at high risk of experiencing sexual harassment included workers living with disability and gay men.

Sexual harassment occurs in every sector – but in some industries, it is so widespread that it becomes normalised as “part of the job.”

"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."

(Participant, the Retail Project)



LGBTQ young people's experiences of WSH most commonly occurred in the accommodation and food services (30%), retail trade (21%), administration and support services (13%), and financial and insurance services (11%) industries. For migrant and refugee women, harassment in the hospitality, care and retail industries was so frequent and normalised that it was nearly an expected part of the job. Similarly, The Retail Project found that sexual harassment in the retail workplace is experienced by workers as routine and unavoidable.

Use of apps and other technologies in workplaces and on workers' personal devices blurs workplace boundaries and extends the reach of WSH.

"...it can come home with them in more ways than if you're just experiencing it at work. Which can be really violating."

"I mean, this is 24 hours a day, right? This isn't limited to just when you're in the workplace."

(Participant, WTFSH Project)

- Workplace Technology-Facilitated Sexual Harassment (WTFSH) involves unwelcome and/or threatening sexual conduct using mobile, online and other digital technologies in a workplace context. It can include a wide range of behaviours within and beyond the physical location of the workplace, and during or outside of work hours.
- The WTFSH Project found 1 in 7 Australian adults surveyed report engaging in workplace technology facilitated sexual harassment.
 - 1 in 4 of people surveyed who had engaged in WTFSH had done so repeatedly against the same person.
- Workplaces are struggling to prevent and respond to WTFSH: they are not always specifically considering digital forms of harassment or defining appropriate and inappropriate conduct on digital technologies in the work context.



WSH cannot be addressed in isolation from other forms of discrimination and harassment.

WSH doesn't happen in isolation. It is part of a broader pattern of prejudice, often occurring alongside other forms of bullying, discrimination and harassment.

"One of the organisations I worked at had pronouns and things that they wanted to put on emails and things like that ... And then they actually got all of the people who ticked as trans and non-binary and put us on a stage, and ... it was a pretty big organisation, and people could ask us whatever questions they wanted. And it was just really shit, because, you know, people would ask pretty shitty questions. And they did it as [the format of the ABC] ... show You Can't Ask That. So they did it in that format. But it was only for trans and non-binary people. "

(Participant, Migrant and Refugee Women Project)

- The #SpeakingOut@Work Project found that LGBTQ young people experienced sexual harassment as part of a continuum of violence rooted in homophobia, biphobia and transphobia. Harassment often involved:
 - anti-LGBTQ prejudice
 - invasive curiosity about identities, bodies and relationships
 - fetishisation and sexualisation
 - harmful stereotypes that portrayed LGBTQ people as predators

30% of young people had received comments about "correcting" their LGBTQ identities through sexual assault and this was more common for young women and young trans and gender diverse people presumed female at birth.

A bisexual cis woman survey participant, aged 22, described how she was cornered in a supply room and was "told that having sex with this person would stop [her] from being confused" about her bisexuality.

(#SpeakingOut@Work Project)



- Migrant and refugee women, across all industries and roles, reported both overt and subtle racism at work. Myths and stereotypes about gender and sexuality shaped their experiences of discrimination and sexual harassment, including racialised sexual stereotypes.
- Sexist and gender discriminatory attitudes and the endorsement of sexual harassment myths are the two most common predictors of self-reported WTFSH perpetration.

WSH was viewed by many workers in the studies as an extension of other unsafe work practices, rather than as a practice that disrupted an otherwise “safe” or “secure” workplace. These overlapping harms – sexual harassment, racism, homophobia, and other forms of discrimination – cannot be separated. Addressing them in silos leads to fragmented and ineffective responses.

“One guy told me he ‘likes his girls damaged’ referring to my mental illness.”

([#SpeakingOut@Work Project](#))

Awareness alone won’t stop workplace sexual harassment.

“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.”

(Participant, the [Retail Project](#))

“At that time, I was so scared, so I would just try and get away and say I couldn’t do that. But he was the boss, and I was the employee. So, I didn’t dare to really say anything. If I did, I would lose my job. From then on, I was just scared of him, and I would try to avoid him, keep my distance. But after a while, I couldn’t deal with it anymore, so I stopped working there. I didn’t dare to even be around him anymore.”

(Participant, [Migrant and Refugee Women Project](#))



Raising awareness of workplace sexual harassment is important – but it is not enough to prevent or address it. The projects found that:

- While some participants were unsure about what “counts” as sexual harassment, most workers could clearly identify when behaviour crossed a line.
- Perpetrators often exploit power imbalances to prevent targets from acting. These imbalances can stem from:
 - structural inequalities (e.g. fear of being “outed,” age-based hierarchies, or fear of visa consequences)
 - workplace factors (e.g. seniority, lack of HR, casualised workforces)

And it’s not only victims who recognise the harm.

- Migrant and refugee women described how perpetrators deliberately crossed boundaries, then dismissed their behaviour as accidental or a “misunderstanding,” making it harder to hold them accountable.
- The *WTFISH Project* found that many perpetrators admitted intent:
 - 31% said they wanted to “annoy” the target
 - 31% wanted to “express anger”
 - 30% intended to “hurt feelings”
 - 30% intended to “humiliate”
 - 30% intended to “frighten”

Although some grey areas remain, in most cases both victims and perpetrators know the behaviour is wrong. Power, not ignorance, drives WSH.

“... that lack of power that I’ve had in a lot of those spaces, whether it was my age or my gender or sexuality; all of these people had more social currency than I did. And because of that, [they] got to say things to a young girl [that] in no other space they would’ve been allowed to.”

(Participant, [#SpeakingOut@Work Project](#))



When responses fall short, the burden shifts to victims – clear action from employers can change that.

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“The whole system, the basis is the necessity for some very brave person to take action, to take on all that risk. It is the person with the least power. It is the person who didn’t have the power. That’s why they were sexually harassed in the first place. And yet we are putting all the burden on them to do something about it. With positive duty, I am really hopeful about pushing the burden on employers and making people justifiably respond throughout the workplace. We need to re-shift the burden.”

(Participant, Migrant and Refugee Women Project)

But there is a large gap between recognising a harm and being able to act on it. Across all projects, workers described the ways that employers’ handling of WSH made taking action difficult or undesirable. Ultimately, when employers fail to take proactive or effective responsibility, the burden falls on workers.



Such challenges included:

- Policies being hard to find, access, or understand.
- Workplaces providing limited information on complaints processes or reporting options.
- Workers lacking confidence in the confidentiality, integrity, and effectiveness of reporting systems. This was commonly due to experiences such as
 - Reports being ignored, downplayed, or met with slow/no action.
 - Outcomes being opaque or ineffective, with no recognition of wrongdoing.
 - Reliance on superficial measures, like moving staff or changing shifts, which addresses neither the behaviour nor the workplace culture.
- Senior staff sometimes gave “avoidance strategies” rather than challenging the behaviour or perpetrator.
- Harassment was implicitly normalised when colleagues ignored it or laughed along.
- Cultural narratives (such as being able to “take a joke”) and industry narratives (such as “the customer is always right”) pressured workers to tolerate harassment.

These patterns reinforce self-doubt, isolate victims, and leave them managing perpetrators’ behaviour on their own, often at significant personal and professional cost.

“I was at a work social event one month after starting; I was told that my attendance was mandatory. It was the birthday of the man who had repeatedly expressed interest in me that I rejected because I was in a relationship. While at the party, this co-worker attempted to kiss me, successfully groped me, and tried to put his hand up my dress. My supervisor and co-workers all witnessed and told me to not make a big deal out of it. I left after an hour because of how unsafe I felt and got no assistance when I explicitly asked for help. On my way out he cornered me in the alleyway and pushed me up against the wall and tried to kiss me and sexually assaulted me. My supervisor was nearby and distracted the male co-worker enough for me to get in my car and drive off. Even after the incident, I received no help, and the situation was ignored even after reporting it to the manager as well.”

(Participant, [#SpeakingOut@Work Project](#))



"The manager just says, 'Oh, that's terrible' or 'Same thing happened to me.'"

(Participant, the Retail Project)

"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."

(Participant, the Retail Project)

"I think it can go with the territory unfortunately ...Because we are trained, within the industries, 'the customer is always right.'"

(Participant, the Retail Project)

"I remember one of my colleagues, not myself, but one of my colleagues, had been groped while on shift by one of the customers ... And the owners and managers just sort of let it slide ... They just sort of went, 'Oh, just, you know, stay away from the table. Someone else will go serve them.'"

(Participant, Migrant and Refugee Women Project)



Employers: what can you do?

Treat WSH as an organisational, not individual, issue.

WSH is not a one-off incident between two people. It reflects broader workplace conditions and power dynamics. Responses that frame it as an “interpersonal dispute” fail to address the structures that allow harassment to occur.

Create safe and inclusive environments.

WSH thrives in unsafe, non-inclusive workplaces. It is interconnected with other forms of discrimination, harassment, and psychological harm. A holistic safety approach should integrate WSH prevention with broader strategies for equity and wellbeing.

This can include:

- Policies and reporting processes that acknowledge interconnected harms, including anonymous reporting and bystander reporting mechanisms.
- Infrastructure and workplace design, such as gender-neutral bathrooms and minimum staffing requirements.
- Addressing gender imbalances in the workforce – for example, the WTFSH Project found harassment was most common in male-dominated workplaces (45%), compared to 39% in gender-balanced workplaces and 16% in female-majority workplaces.

Strengthen training.

Across all projects, workers reported training was irregular, superficial, or entirely absent – often perceived as a “tick-the-box” exercise that didn’t reflect their realities.

Better training should:

- Be regular, interactive, and face-to-face
- Explicitly address sexual harassment and workplace rights
- Use real-world scenarios and bystander intervention strategies



- Be led by expert facilitators
- Be inclusive of LGBTQ workers, migrant and refugee women, young people, and others at increased risk
- Be tailored for different workplace roles, especially management

“Workplaces, most of them or the big corporates, might have a little webinar or something like that they have to click through, and they don’t really have to pay attention to it.”

(Participant, WTFESH Project)

Governments: what can you do?

- Tailor industry-specific approaches and workforce-specific approaches that recognise the intersections and heightened risks for some cohorts, and recognise that the conditions required to make a workplace safe vary because of different job requirements.
- Reduce the siloes across different policy areas that seek to address various forms of workplace harm (for example, employment law and regulation, discrimination law, criminal justice, migration law and policy).
- Consider expanding positive duty obligations to other forms of discrimination to ensure active efforts to shift workplace culture.
- Invest in safe work services external to employers that can ensure inclusive approaches for workers 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.



Tools and next steps for employers and policymakers

Australian Human Rights Commission resources for employers:

<https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/sex-discrimination/workplace-sexual-harassment-resources/employers>

Australian Human Rights Commission guidance on Positive Duty:

<https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/sex-discrimination/positive-duty-sex-discrimination-act/guidance-materials>

Australian Human Rights Commission factsheets and resources on Positive Duty:

<https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/sex-discrimination/positive-duty-sex-discrimination-act/factsheets-other-resources>

Our Watch resources for preventing WSH:

<https://www.ourwatch.org.au/workplace/resources/prevent-workplace-sexual-harassment>