

Communicating for Workplace Cultural Change



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This resource is designed for senior leaders, managers, and professional or operational staff with responsibilities for workplace policies, people management, and organisational culture. It aims to support leaders to effectively communicate employees' rights, employers' legal obligations related to psychological safety, and the reasons their workplace is taking active steps to prevent sexual harassment and implement safe, effective response processes.

The resource also helps organisations:

- Embed communication strategies that promote a safe, respectful, inclusive, and gender-equitable workplace culture.
- Foster cultural and organisational change through trauma-informed messaging and strategic engagement at all levels.
- Reinforce leadership accountability and support sector-specific cultural change that aligns with legal obligations and the positive duty to prevent workplace sexual harassment.

If you would like information about training by Working Women's Centre Victoria on preventing sexual harassment in your workplace, contact us info@wwcvic.org.au

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Working Women's Centre Victoria acknowledges the traditional custodians of the land where we work, and First Peoples language groups and communities across Victoria and Australia. We pay our respects to Elders past and present. We celebrate the people, traditions, culture and strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and the fight for survival, justice and Country. We thank the Traditional custodians for caring for Country for thousands of generations. Working Women's Centre Victoria recognises the ongoing impact of colonisation, dispossession and racism. As a Centre focused on work place rights, we acknowledge the history of exploitation Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have suffered working in the colony, denied access to their wages which were often simply stolen by corrupt officials and employers, and the ongoing exploitation and discrimination many First Nation people still experience at work today. We recognise that Sovereignty was never ceded and that this always was and always will be Aboriginal land.



The Working Women's Centre Victoria understands the term 'working women' means all women (this includes cis and trans women) and non-binary people (this includes people who are gender diverse, gender fluid, masculine or feminine) who meet our service eligibility criteria.

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Communications to support the implementation of your work

To prevent sexual harassment in your workplace, an effective communications plan is critical to building an understanding of what the organisation is doing, expectations of its employees, and what employees can expect from leaders. A practical communications engagement plan increases the likelihood of success.

Objectives

Clearly define the objectives of the communications plan. For example, to:

- Increase awareness and understanding of sexual harassment its causes, impact, and how to prevent it.
- Foster a culture of psychological safety, respect, and inclusivity.
- Encourage active participation and engagement in activities related to equality and respect.
- Celebrate and recognise diverse achievements within the company.

Target Audience

When identifying key internal audiences for your communications plan, it is essential to consider individuals and groups within your organisation who will either make a significant contribution or be impacted by the initiatives. For example, consider engaging employees at all levels, business partners, managers and supervisors, and staff committees.

Key messages

Develop key messages that align with the objectives and resonate with each target audience. For example:

Where we want to be

- Everyone deserves to be safe, supported and respected at work.
- We can all improve the lives of our colleagues by eliminating behaviour that affects the health and safety of colleagues because of their gender. All workplaces have a responsibility to ensure they are safe for everyone regardless of their gender, sexual orientation, race, religion, or ability.

Victorian workplaces

- Equality, respect and safety are core to our organisations values and essential to the industry we work in. These principles are often what drive our commitment to making meaningful impact. Providing an equal and safe workplace is non-negotiable. We have a collective responsibility to lead change.
- A safe, inclusive and diverse workplace means a healthy workforce that is high-performing and professional.

Preventing Sexual Harassment

- When we do better, our workplaces and industry thrive.
- Now is the time to act.

Gendered violence

- A national survey by the Australian Human Rights Commission found that **41% of women** and **26% of men** experienced sexual harassment at work in the past five years.¹
 - Nine in ten respondents said their harasser(s) were male. Harassers were also significantly more likely to be described as over the age of 40.
- Nearly half (48%) of women and 25% of men working in retail reported experiencing sexual harassment in the past five years.²
- In 2023, 8% of women and 5% of men in public healthcare reported experiencing sexual harassment at work, with a 1% increase from previous years.³
- 81% of people who had experienced sexual harassment did not report their most recent incident, either internally through workplace processes or externally.⁴
- 50% of women and 38% of men in the legal sector have experienced bullying or intimidation.⁵
- 45% of women and 24% of men believe gender discrimination still exists in Australian workplaces.⁶
- Work-related gendered violence is any behaviour, directed at any person, or that affects a person, because of their sex, gender or sexual orientation, or because they do not adhere to socially prescribed gender roles, which creates a risk to health and safety. This includes violence targeted directly at someone specifically because:
 - they are a woman
 - they are LGBTIQ+
 - they do not follow socially prescribed gender roles and stereotypes.⁷
- Gendered violence can include sexual harassment, stalking, verbal abuse, unwelcome comments or gestures, or threats of physical violence and can be perpetrated by colleagues, supervisors, managers, or clients.⁸

¹ Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC). Time for Respect: Fifth national survey on sexual harassment in Australian workplaces. 2022.

² Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS), "Just another day in retail – Understanding and addressing workplace sexual harassment in the Australian retail industry (In brief)" (June 2024).

³ Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector (Victoria), Insights report: Sexual harassment (Updated 2 July 2025)

⁴ Australian Human Rights Commission, Time for Respect: Fifth national survey on sexual harassment in Australian workplaces (2022)

⁵ Victorian Legal Services Board + Commissioner (VLSB+C), Sexism in the Legal Profession: Report on the 2021–22 Research Project (2023), p. 7.

⁶ Our Watch, *New data shows gaps still exist in beliefs about gender discrimination*, 3 April 2025, available at: <https://www.ourwatch.org.au/news/new-data-shows-gaps-still-exist-in-beliefs-about-gender-discrimination>

⁷ Safe Work Australia, *Preventing Workplace Gendered Violence*, 2022, p. 4

Why is gender inequality a risk factor for sexual harassment?

- Persistent gender pay gaps and occupational segregation reinforce the devaluation of women's work and status. For instance, in Victoria's public healthcare sector, men earn on average **31.9% more** than women, despite women comprising **77%** of the workforce. Such disparities can perpetuate environments where unequal treatment and harassment are more likely to occur.⁹
- Workplace cultures that tolerate sexist jokes, objectification, or dismissive attitudes towards gender equality contribute to the normalisation of harassment. The Respect@Work report emphasises that gender inequality and entrenched sexist attitudes are key drivers of workplace sexual harassment.¹⁰
- Gender inequality creates power imbalances that create a context where someone who holds power may gain a sense of entitlement, while others may hold a fear of challenging or speaking out against that power.¹¹
- A lack of accountability for unsafe, disrespectful and discriminatory behaviour in the workplace sets the workplace tone, creating cultures where unlawful conduct is accepted and unchallenged. On the other hand, clear expectations about appropriate behaviour, set and upheld by workplaces, can reduce the likelihood of relevant unlawful conduct occurring.¹²
- Workplaces shaped by gender inequality often lack effective, trusted reporting systems, leading to underreporting of sexual harassment. In Victoria, while formal reports rose slightly between 2021 and 2023, many organisations recorded fewer internal complaints — highlighting persistent, gendered barriers such as fear of retaliation and not being believed.¹³

Executives, managers and partners

- It is important you understand your responsibilities, outlined in the Working Women's Centre Victoria resources and training.
- Your workplace has an obligation to prevent gendered violence and discrimination.
- You are vital to ensuring your workplace is safe and equal for everyone, no matter their gender and as required by the law.
- Safe, inclusive and respectful workplaces are the foundation of successful, productive and healthy workforces.

Health and safety representatives, people and culture managers

9 Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector (Vic), Insights report: gender pay gap (July 2025)

10 Australian Human Rights Commission, Respect@Work: National Inquiry into Sexual Harassment in Australian Workplaces (2020), p. 15

11 Safe Work Australia, Managing psychosocial hazards at work – Code of Practice,

12 Australian Human Rights Commission, Causes and Risk Factors of Sex Discrimination, Sexual Harassment and Other Unlawful Behaviours (2020) 2.

13 Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector (Vic), Insights Report: Sexual Harassment (updated 2 July 2025),

Preventing Sexual Harassment

- Gender-based violence is not permitted under the *Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004* (Vic) and other relevant workplace legislation.
- Employers must provide and maintain a safe work environment where all staff belong and are free from violence, harassment and discrimination.
- You have an important role to play in supporting our organisation to meet its obligations and provide a safe workplace.

Employees

- Every person working in your company or organisation has a right to a safe, supportive and respectful workplace.
- We can all play a part to prevent sexual harassment at work.
- When you challenge sexism and gender stereotypes at work you make work safer for your colleagues, allowing them to focus on the job at hand rather than navigating harmful dynamics.
- Ask your boss what they are doing about preventing gendered violence.

Communication channels

Determine the appropriate channels to deliver your messages. Communications should be sensitive to the potential impacts of trauma and aim to avoid causing further harm.

A trauma- informed approach includes:

- Using respectful, non-graphic language and avoiding distressing imagery or detailed accounts of violence.
- Providing clear contact details for internal and external support services (e.g. Employment Assistance Program or 1800RESPECT).
- Respecting confidentiality and obtaining consent before sharing personal stories.
- Giving people choice and control over how they engage with content.
- Affirming safety, inclusion, and believing people who have experienced sexual harassment.

Consider a mix of communication channels to meet different needs such as:

- intranet or internal website
- email newsletters or bulletins
- instructional videos
- all-staff meetings
- team meetings and organisation updates
- supervision and performance development conversations
- posters and signage in common areas
- social media platforms (if applicable)
- diversity and inclusion workshops or training sessions.

Take an inclusive language approach in your workplace

Language is a crucial component of how we express ourselves and connect. However, language continues to evolve as we do. The words that may have been acceptable now may not be accepted later. We need to adapt to ensure our language evolves with community expectations.

These principles are a helpful guide:

- Show care and be respectful.
- Reflect on your position of power and hold yourself accountable to the impact you have on others.
- If you don't know something, ask. Model continuous learning and humility as a manager or leader.
- If you are challenged, be open and receive that feedback. It's a learning opportunity. While it may not have been intended to be hurtful or harmful, we know that our words and actions impact others, particularly when there are power differentials present. If someone with less power is saying it's harmed them, believe them.
- Do not make assumptions.
- Use person-centred language that affirms dignity, avoids stereotypes, and respects agency. This means:
 - Referring to the person first, not the issue — e.g. say “a person who has experienced sexual harassment” instead of “a victim”.
 - Avoiding assumptions or labels based on identity, background, or perceived vulnerability.
 - Using language that reflects choice and autonomy — e.g. “they chose to disclose” rather than “they admitted...”.
- Ensuring communication is respectful, inclusive, and avoids dehumanising or passive phrasing

Many inclusive language guides can be downloaded, including [Amnesty International Inclusive Language guide](#).

It is important to use inclusive language in workplace policies and practice. Reviewing policies and procedures regularly to ensure any language changes are reflected over time.

Support services in Victoria

If you or a colleague have experienced sexual harassment or other unacceptable behaviours, there are both internal and external support services. You can select a range of support services listed below and are also free to seek advice from someone at work, a friend, or a health professional.

Internal Support

Internal support mechanisms can include trained HR or OHS staff as well as confidential counselling and support for personal or professional matters through your workplace's Employee Assistance Program provider (if your workplace has one).

Employee Assistance Program (EAP): If your workplace offers an EAP, this service can provide short-term support and general strategies for managing stress, personal issues, or workplace concerns. However, EAP practitioners may not always have specialised training in responding to gendered violence or sexual harassment.

Note: Not all workplaces provide an EAP, particularly smaller businesses or casualised environments. If an EAP is not available, or if you would prefer to speak with someone external, you can contact 1800RESPECT or another specialist support service listed below.

External Support Services

1800 Respect 24/7 counselling for anyone affected by family violence or sexual assault.
Phone: 1800 737 732 **Website:** 1800respect.org.au

Lifeline 24/7 crisis support and suicide prevention service.

Phone: 13 11 14 **Website:** lifeline.org.au

13Yarn 24/7 culturally safe crisis support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
Phone: 13 92 76 **Website:** 13yarn.org.au

Mensline counselling and support for men.

Phone 1300 78 99 78 **Website:** mensline.org.au

Headspace support for young people aged between 12 and 25 years.

Phone: 1800 650 890 **Website:** headspace.org.au

Sexual Assault Crisis Line after-hours, crisis counselling service for sexual assault victims.

Phone: 1800 806 292 **Website:** sacl.com.au

Legal Services

Working Women's Centre Victoria free legal assistance about workplace issues for working women and non-binary people.

Phone: 1800 992 842 **Website:** wwcvic.org.au

Q+ Law a safe entry point to access legal assistance for all Victorians who identify as part of the LGBTIQ+ community. **Website:** www.qlaw.org.au

Victoria Legal Aid assistance for people with legal problems including sexual harassment and discrimination. **Phone:** 1300 792 387 **Website:** legalaid.vic.gov.au/sexual-harassment

Preventing Sexual Harassment

External reporting to regulatory bodies

If you would prefer to report the behaviour to someone outside of your current workplace, you can speak with:

- **Australian Human Rights Commission** – **Website:** humanrights.gov.au/our-work/sex-discrimination
- **Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission** – **Phone:** 1300 292 153
Email: complaints@veohrc.vic.gov.au. **Website:** humanrights.vic.gov.au. People who have experienced sexual harassment may [lodge a complaint](#) to try and resolve the dispute via a dispute resolution process.
- **Fair Work Commission** support with workplace disputes. **Website:** fwc.gov.au/apply-or-lodge
- **WorkSafe** free OHS support and advice, reporting of sexual harassment including doing so anonymously. **Phone:** 1800 136 089. **Website:** worksafe.vic.gov.au/report-incident

In addition to the national and state-based regulators, your profession may have industry-based regulators, professional bodies or councils you can report to.

Victoria Police

If you are concerned for someone's safety, or in an emergency situation, call 000 for urgent police assistance.

Acts such as indecent exposure, stalking, sexual assault and obscene or threatening communications (for example phone calls, letters, emails, text messages and posts on social networking sites) may also be offences under criminal law. A person who has experienced sexual harassment or sexual violence may want to report to the police by contacting local Sexual Offences and Child Abuse Investigation Team. police.vic.gov.au/sexual-offence-child-abuse-teams-centres