

# Preventing sexual harassment

For managers and supervisors



### Preventing sexual harassment for managers and supervisors

---

This resource is for people who manage, supervise or mentor people, to provide clear guidance on how to:

- **Recognise, prevent and respond** to sexual harassment and other forms of work-related gendered violence;
- **Understand their legal obligations** under anti-discrimination, workplace, and occupational health and safety laws, including the positive duty to prevent harm;
- **Model safe, respectful, and inclusive leadership** that contributes to a psychologically safe workplace;
- **Respond appropriately to incidents** as they arise, using trauma-informed, person-centred approaches;
- **Identify and address workplace risk factors**, including gender inequality, power imbalances, and cultural norms that enable harassment;
- **Foster a proactive and accountable workplace culture**, where early intervention and support are the norm.

*If you would like information about training by Working Women's Centre Victoria on preventing sexual harassment in your workplace, contact us [info@wwcvc.org.au](mailto:info@wwcvc.org.au)*

June 2025 – Working Women's Centre Victoria



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.

# Table of contents



## Contents

- Preventing sexual harassment ..... 1
- Table of contents..... 3
  - The role of supervisors..... 4
    - Understand unacceptable behaviour in the workplace..... 4
    - Sexual harassment and other forms of work-related gendered violence* ..... 5
  - Communicate with your team ..... 8
  - Minimise the risk of sexual harassment occurring ..... 8
  - Lead by example ..... 9
  - Prioritise staff wellbeing ..... 11
  - Respond safely to day-to-day incidents ..... 11
  - Address unacceptable behaviours early and clearly..... 12
- Support services in Victoria ..... 11
- Case Study..... 13

### The role of supervisors

As a supervisor, you play a critical role in preventing and responding to sexual harassment. Your role is to understand what unacceptable behaviour in the workplace is, communicate acceptable standards of behaviour and relevant policies with your direct reports, handle day-to-day incidents and lead by example.

### Understand unacceptable behaviour in the workplace

All employees are entitled to physical and psychological safety in the workplace, as well as a workplace free from sexual harassment and gender-based discrimination and bullying. This isn't just best practice; it's now mandated by law. However, the reality for many people in many industries is that the workplace is not safe.

### Harassment and bullying in the workplace– the statistics

Workplace sexual harassment remains a significant challenge across Australian industries, with one in 3 workers experiencing workplace sexual harassment in the last 5 years according to the Australian Human Rights Commission's 2022 national survey.<sup>1</sup> The Australian Bureau of Statistics' 2021-22 Personal Safety Survey<sup>2</sup> found that 1.7 million people (8.7%) experienced sexual harassment in the last 12 months, including 1.3 million women (13%) and 426,800 men (4.5%).

The economic impact is substantial, with workplace sexual harassment estimated to cost the Australian economy approximately \$3.8 billion in 2018<sup>3</sup> according to Deloitte Access Economics analysis for the Respect@Work report.

- This cost breaks down to \$2.6 billion in lost productivity and \$0.9 billion in other financial costs, with each case of harassment representing around 4 working days of lost output,
- Employers bore 70% of the financial costs, government 23% and individuals 7%,
- While lost wellbeing for victims was an additional \$250m, or nearly \$5000 per victim on average.

---

<sup>1</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission (2022), *Time for Respect: Fifth National Survey on Sexual Harassment in Australian Workplaces*.

<sup>2</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (2023), *Personal Safety, Australia, 2021–22 financial year* — released 15 March 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Deloitte Access Economics (2019), *The Economic Costs of Sexual Harassment in the Workplace: Final Report*, prepared for the Australian Human Rights Commission as part of the Respect@Work Inquiry.

## Preventing Sexual Harassment

Despite these significant impacts, reporting remains low with only 18% of sexual harassment incidents reported<sup>4</sup>, and the 2024 Workplace Gender Equality Agency data shows that more than 1 in 4 employers (28%) are not monitoring how prevalent it is in their workplaces.<sup>5</sup>

### **Sexual harassment and other forms of work-related gendered violence**

Legislation<sup>9</sup> prohibiting sex discrimination, including sexual harassment, has been in effect since 1984. This includes:

- treating someone less favourably because of their gender, such as offering women, non-binary people and men different pay or benefits for the same job or requiring women to wear particular clothing at work when men are not expected to do the same.
- where an unreasonable condition, requirement or practice appears to treat everyone the same, but in fact disadvantages people of a particular gender, for example, requiring all employees to work 9am to 5pm. This may appear to treat everyone equally, but could disadvantage women, who are more likely to have caring responsibilities. This will only be unlawful if it is not reasonable.

Employers now also have responsibilities under sex discrimination, workplace and occupational health and safety legislation to provide workplaces free from gendered violence and sexist behaviours. This includes the following behaviours directed at a person, or affecting a person, because of their gender or sexual orientation or because they do not adhere to gender stereotypes:

- stalking, intimidation or threats
- verbal abuse
- being left out or excluded
- sexually explicit gestures or comments
- offensive language and imagery
- put downs, suggestive or degrading remarks and hints
- being undermined in your role or position
- sexual assault or rape.

---

<sup>4</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission's *Time for Respect: Fifth National Survey on Sexual Harassment in Australian Workplaces* (2022)

<sup>5</sup> Workplace Gender Equality Agency's 2024 reporting data

## Preventing Sexual Harassment

It also includes related acts of victimisation – treating or threatening to treat someone badly because they spoke up about any of these behaviours or because they reported these behaviours, asserted their rights under the law, or helped someone else to do so.

Work related sexual harassment occurs when someone (including a colleague, manager, or customer)

- makes an unwelcome sexual advance, or an unwelcome request for sexual favours, to the other person, or
- engages in any other unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature in relation to the other person, where a reasonable person could have anticipated that the other person would be offended, humiliated or intimidated.

This can include the following:

- unwanted touching
- unwanted staring
- repeated unwanted requests to go on dates – asking a colleague once in a respectful manner may be ok, but not if the person asking is in a position of power.
- sexual jokes
- questions or comments about a person's body
- displays of rude pictures

**Remember, that intention is not the focus here. It is the impact that the behaviour has.**

These laws cover behaviour that involves work, workers, or working relationships, including, when working offsite or from home, at staff social events (whether in the workplace or elsewhere), in the workplace during and after hours or during a lunch break, between colleagues outside the workplace and outside of work hours, in a hotel room during work-related travel (e.g., for a conference or work meeting).

The behaviours described above are referred to as different things within national and state legislation, however, will be referred to as “sexual harassment” within this resource.

## Discrimination

In addition to sex discrimination under Victorian law, under the *Equal Opportunity Act 2010* (Vic), employers have a positive duty to eliminate, as far as possible, discrimination, sexual

## Preventing Sexual Harassment

harassment and victimisation. This means that positive action should be taken to prevent these behaviours – regardless of whether someone has made a complaint.

It is important to note that many experiences of discrimination are not based on a single characteristic, i.e., just sexism. Women’s Legal Service Victoria’s research into the legal sector found workplace cultures of “everyday” discrimination, bullying and harassment related to race/ethnicity, disability and mental health, class background, sexuality, and gender identity.<sup>6</sup>

Under Victorian anti-discrimination legislation employees cannot be discriminated against based on attributes including, disability, gender, marital status, parent and carer status, physical features, political belief or activity, pregnancy and breastfeeding, race, and religious belief or activity.

Further information on discrimination and your positive duty to prevent sexual harassment, discrimination and victimisation can be found on [Positive duty | Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission](#).

### **Bullying**

Workplaces have an OHS obligation to eliminate risks to health and safety, so far as reasonably practicable. This includes the risk of bullying. **Serious bullying is a criminal offence in Victoria.**

Bullying is offensive, intimidating, malicious or insulting behaviour involving the misuse of power that can make a person feel vulnerable, upset, humiliated, undermined or threatened. Power does not always mean being in a position of authority but can include both personal strength and the power to coerce through fear or intimidation.

Bullying can take the form of physical, verbal, and non-verbal conduct. Non-verbal conduct may include postings on social media. However, reasonable, and constructive criticism of performance or behaviour will not amount to bullying on its own.

Further information on bullying and the law can be found on [Workplace bullying and the law | WorkSafe Victoria](#)

### **Why does sexual harassment occur?**

Gender inequality is recognised as the key underlying cause of gendered violence. The picture of gender inequality and sexism in many industries is bleak. Gender inequality creates power

---

<sup>6</sup> Women’s Legal Service Victoria (2022), *Gender and Intersectional Inequality: Power and Privilege in Victoria’s Legal and Justice Workforce*

## Preventing Sexual Harassment

imbalances 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.<sup>11</sup>

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.<sup>12</sup>

### **Communicate with your team**

Supervisors bridge the gap between the organisation's policies and the day-to-day experiences of employees. Management is key to enforcing policies and fostering an environment where all employees feel safe and respected.

In your role:

- Regularly hold discussions with your team about equality, safety, respect and inclusion. Make it a regular part of your team meeting and part of performance reviews.
- Share relevant policies regularly (not just at induction).
- Share the workplace resources with all staff, especially more junior and new staff.
- Create opportunities for feedback at both the individual and organisational level. Regular feedback channels empower employees to voice their concerns and share ideas, helping to address issues before they escalate.

### **Minimise the risk of sexual harassment occurring**

Supervisors have a role in identifying and minimising the risk of harassment occurring. Health and safety regulations identify the following things that increase the likelihood of harassment. They include situational factors such as the presence of alcohol as well as workplace cultural and structural factors such as hierarchy in the workplace and gender inequality:

- acceptance of inappropriate behaviour (e.g. racially or sexually crude conversations, innuendo or offensive jokes are part of the accepted culture).
- workplaces organised according to a strict hierarchical structure.
- use of alcohol at work activities and attendance at conferences and social events as part of work duties, including overnight travel.
- power imbalances along gendered lines (e.g. workplaces where men hold the majority of management and decision-making positions).

## Preventing Sexual Harassment

- particular cohorts of employees who are more vulnerable such as young employees, employees with a disability, employees from culturally and racially marginalised backgrounds.
- employees are isolated or working from home which may provide an opportunity for covert sexual harassment to occur online or through phone communication.
- interacting with patients, customers or other third-parties, either face-to-face, on the phone or online.
- poor understanding among workplace leaders of the nature, drivers and impacts of sexual harassment.
- workplaces where racial prejudice, for example, directed towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees or migrant employees, are present.

As a supervisor it is important that you take action to ensure that the workplace is safe at all times, paying particular attention to the safety of more junior staff or those who may experience intersecting forms of discrimination. This may mean championing a change in the way interact with patients, customers, other staff and stakeholders in positions of power.

### **Lead by example**

Creating safe, fair and respectful workplaces requires cultural change as well as the right systems and processes. As a people leader you can support a positive culture each day at work.

Here are some examples you can draw from:

### **Support initiatives to prevent sexual harassment through promoting gender equality and respect**

- As gender inequality is a key driver of sexual harassment, initiatives to promote equality for women, Non binary and gender diverse people, culturally and racially marginalised people, people from the LGBTQIA+ community, people with disabilities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and others who experience intersecting discrimination, is the key to prevention.
- Actively support initiatives by leadership and your operational teams, including equitable hiring and promotion processes.
- Having conversations with your team about how diversity in the workplace is good for business and for the team.

### **Actively seek diverse perspectives**

- Ensure that team meetings and decision-making processes include diverse voices, encouraging input from individuals of different genders, backgrounds and experiences.
- Avoid "groupthink" by inviting dissenting opinions and considering all viewpoints in discussions.

### **Have difficult conversations**

- Initiate and engage in conversations about gender inequality, discrimination, and sexual harassment, even when uncomfortable, and provide feedback to those engaging in unacceptable behaviours.
- Approach these conversations with empathy and a willingness to listen, but also with a commitment to challenge and change harmful norms and behaviours.

### **Support work-life balance**

- Encourage and model work-life balance by taking and promoting the use of parental leave, flexible working hours, and other supportive policies that benefit all employees, regardless of gender.
- Acknowledge and accommodate the diverse care-giving responsibilities of employees.

### **Educate yourself and your team**

- Commit to ongoing learning about gender equality, diversity, and inclusion. Attend workshops, read relevant literature, and stay informed about best practices.
- Encourage your team to do the same, providing resources and time for professional development in these areas.

### **Lead by example with accountability**

## Preventing Sexual Harassment

- Hold yourself and other supervisors accountable for meeting diversity and inclusion goals, including making these goals part of performance evaluations. Examples include:
  - Including diversity-related KPIs in manager performance plans (e.g. staff retention rates, cultural safety initiatives, inclusive recruitment practices).
  - Tracking participation in cultural competency or anti-discrimination training as part of annual reviews.
  - Requiring leaders to report on how they've contributed to inclusive team culture and psychological safety.
  - Embedding inclusion responsibilities into job descriptions and promotion criteria.
- Admit mistakes openly and demonstrate a commitment to continuous improvement in promoting a more equitable workplace.

## Prioritise staff wellbeing

There are a range of things that supervisors can do consistently to increase staff engagement and promote a healthy workplace culture and staff wellbeing.

- Ensure that staff are aware of policies and entitlements, actively encourage staff to take up flexible working and parental leave arrangements.
- Role-model how work-life balance works for you. While this is a personal preference and often some people derive energy and motivation from their work, it's important that staff feel as though they can take time out and step away on holiday without fear of being inundated on return or losing out on development and professional opportunities.
- Administrative tasks such as organising celebrations – for example, birthdays or work anniversaries – can often fall on the shoulders of one person. To reduce this burden, consider dividing this responsibility amongst the team. Often, women are tasked with this type of contribution. If people at all levels and seniority take the time to celebrate one another, it can add to a sense of inclusion and shared responsibility.

## Respond safely to day-to-day incidents

As a supervisor or mentor, you are in a position where you might witness unacceptable behaviour or receive reports of such behaviour from affected employees or colleagues. When either of these occur, your role is to:

## Preventing Sexual Harassment

- Respond appropriately, recognising and addressing barriers to support and safety and facilitating referrals to appropriate services,
- Be familiar with policies and supports, including leave entitlements and knowing how to support staff to be safe at work,
- Safely record and store information as per your workplace's policies and procedures.

### **Address unacceptable behaviours early and clearly**

Addressing unacceptable behaviours early with the person using them is crucial because it prevents these actions from becoming ingrained and normalised. Early intervention stops the escalation of harmful behaviours, which, if left unchecked, can develop into a consistent pattern, leading others to believe such conduct is acceptable.

There are several ways you can address behaviour. It does not necessarily require direct intervention. If a situation can be dangerous or is at risk of getting worse for yourself or the person affected as a result of directly intervening, consider addressing it afterwards.

It is always difficult to bring a response to mind when you hear or see something that is inappropriate. Many people freeze or are not confident to say something. It is important that what you say draws attention away from the person targeted and focuses attention back on the person using the behaviour. Some suggestions that can be used in many situations include

- "I'd prefer if you didn't use that terminology/turn of phrase, it makes me feel uncomfortable."
- "I know it's important to have a laugh, but I didn't find that funny."

In the moment you can also distract the person using the unacceptable behaviour. For example, if you notice someone being harassed, you can approach them to ask them a question, greet them or check a meeting time or location, stand or sit between them, taking them out of that situation and thus, de-escalating it.

Sometimes it is better to delay action. This is when you wait for the situation to pass, and check in with the affected person to make sure they are okay. Even if you were unable to intervene at the time, checking in later makes a difference to the person who was harassed.

If you are not comfortable intervening, seek assistance from your manager, supervisor, operations staff, Human Resources representative or a colleague you feel safe talking to about this.

### **Call in rather than call out**

Educating a person rather than reprimanding can be a useful tactic (where appropriate) to assert what behaviours are harmful and how they can be changed.

While these conversations may be difficult, it is best they take place at the first possible opportunity when you become aware of the sexual harassment occurring. These conversations initially are informal, and simply an opportunity to provide feedback. However, should the behaviour continue or escalate, then the matter may be referred to the workplace's grievance and disciplinary processes.

#### **Here are some examples of how to approach a difficult situation:**

- “Hi (name), do you have a moment to chat? I wanted to discuss something that came up during the meeting earlier today. I noticed that when you made the comment about (the remark), it seemed to cause some discomfort among the team.”
- “Hi (name), thanks for sitting down with me today. I wanted to talk about something I’ve noticed regarding your interactions with the graduates. Your jokes and comments about their outfits are not appropriate given your leadership role, your gender, as well as the nature of your comments. I appreciate they might talk amongst themselves about what they are wearing. If you are unsure about whether it is ok to say something, I suggest erring on the side of not saying anything.”

The **Fair Work Ombudsman has a guide on managing difficult conversations** that that you can use to plan and direct these informal discussions.

Addressing issues promptly fosters a respectful and positive environment, reinforcing clear standards of behaviour and helping individuals correct course before more serious consequences arise. If the behaviour is ongoing and/or of a serious nature further action may be required.

It is important that when an employee makes a report their safety and support is considered as part of the formal reporting and disciplinary processes of the firm. This means that the person affected is asked what support they would like from the firm. Being person-centred and trauma-informed does not always mean doing what the person requests. It means genuinely considering their wishes and the impact that decisions may have on them.

## Preventing Sexual Harassment

Ultimately, being person-centred and trauma-informed means **doing things with people, not to them** — even when their request cannot be fully met. It is about building trust, preserving dignity, and acting with transparency and care.

Trauma-informed, person-centred communication supports this by using respectful, non-graphic language, avoiding stereotypes, and affirming people's autonomy. For example, say “a person who experienced sexual harassment” rather than “a victim”, and “they chose not to make a complaint” instead of implying blame. Always provide support contacts, maintain confidentiality, and centre safety and inclusion. These practices ensure communication informs without harm — and respects the people it's meant to serve.

### 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 any of the services 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](http://1800respect.org.au)

**Lifeline** 24/7 crisis support and suicide prevention service.  
Phone: 13 11 14 **Website:** [lifeline.org.au](http://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](http://13yarn.org.au)

**Mensline** counselling and support for men.  
Phone 1300 78 99 78 **Website:** [mensline.org.au](http://mensline.org.au)

**Headspace** support for young people aged between 12 and 25 years.  
Phone: 1800 650 890 **Website:** [headspace.org.au](http://headspace.org.au)

**Sexual Assault Crisis Line** after-hours, crisis counselling service for sexual assault victims.  
Phone: 1800 806 292 **Website:** [sacl.com.au](http://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](http://wwcvic.org.au)

## Preventing Sexual Harassment

**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](http://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](http://legalaid.vic.gov.au/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](http://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/sex-discrimination)
- **Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission** – **Phone:** 1300 292 153  
**Email:** [complaints@veohrc.vic.gov.au](mailto:complaints@veohrc.vic.gov.au). **Website:** [humanrights.vic.gov.au](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://police.vic.gov.au/sexual-offence-child-abuse-teams-centres)

# Case Study example

## ANDREA'S STORY

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit, sed do eiusmod tempor incididunt ut labore et dolore magna aliqua. Ut enim ad minim veniam, quis nostrud exercitation ullamco laboris nisi ut aliquip ex ea commodo consequat. Duis aute irure dolor in reprehenderit in voluptate velit esse cillum dolore eu fugiat nulla pariatur. Excepteur sint occaecat cupidatat non proident, sunt in culpa qui officia deserunt mollit anim id est laborum.

### Instructions:

Use this space to highlight a real or representative scenario that shows how your workplace is putting respectful, inclusive communication into practice. This might include:

- A **case study** about a leader responding appropriately to a disclosure of sexual harassment or discrimination
- A **snapshot** of how inclusive language improved team culture or communication
- A **success story** showing how proactive communication helped prevent harm or build trust
- A **staff voice** sharing lived experience (with consent)
- A **sector-specific example** that aligns with your workplace (e.g. healthcare, retail, hospitality)

### Include:

- A clear title that reflects the theme (e.g. "Speaking Up Made Safe", "What Good Leadership Looks Like")
- A brief (150–200 word) narrative that focuses on what happened, how it was handled, and what changed
- Key takeaways or learning point