

Preventing sexual harassment

For operational support staff



Preventing sexual harassment for operational support staff

This resource is designed to support operational and support staff—including HR, OHS, office managers, and others responsible for workplace systems and people management—to prevent workplace sexual harassment by embedding safety, compliance, and inclusion into core policies, practices, and culture.

It aims to help operational leaders understand their legal obligations, identify and manage psychosocial risks, address structural inequalities, and implement practical strategies to create a safe and respectful workplace for all employees.

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

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
Your role in shaping workplace culture.....	4
Employee Rights in Australian Workplaces.....	4
Risk management for sexual harassment	5
Core safety obligations under Occupational Health and Safety Act Vic (2004).....	6
Risk factors for harmful behaviour.....	6
Considering other forms of discrimination and inequality	7
Risks of non-compliance	7
Unsure about your current risk?	10
Managing risk through policies, procedures, education and action planning.....	11
Support services in Victoria	11
Internal Support.....	11
External Support Services	11

Your role in shaping workplace culture

As an employee responsible for leading and supporting organisational and operational change to prevent sexual harassment your work is important.

Employee Rights in Australian Workplaces

All employees deserve to be treated fairly and with respect. It's not just good for business; it's the law. Discrimination, sexual harassment and bullying cost time and money, damage morale, reduce productivity and undermine reputations.

Under the *Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004* (Vic), employers must, so far as is reasonably practicable, provide and maintain for employees, a working environment that is safe and without risks to health. This includes managing risks related to harmful behaviour including sexual and gender-based harassment, bullying, occupational violence and aggression, and any other risks that could affect an employee's wellbeing.

Under anti-discrimination law, like the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* (Cth), workplaces now have a positive duty to eliminate, as far as possible, the following unlawful behaviours from occurring in a work context or in connection with work:

- sex discrimination
- sexual harassment
- sex-based harassment
- behaviours that create a hostile workplace environment on the ground of sex
- related acts of victimisation.

These laws cover behaviour that impacts interns, graduates, persons seeking employment, employees, or working relationships. It includes behaviours 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).

Rights enshrined by these laws that relate to gendered violence including sexual harassment include:

- **A safe work environment:** Employees have the right to a safe workplace where psychosocial hazards are minimised, and they are protected from discrimination, harassment (including sexual harassment and work-related gendered violence), bullying, and victimisation.
- **Training, information and instruction:** Employees must have access to information, training and instructions on safety protocols and workplace expectations.
- **Consultation:** Employees have the right to be consulted on health and safety matters including changes that may impact their work environment.

An Employers' responsibilities apply across all stages of employment, including recruitment, during pregnancy, when returning to work after parental leave, if injured or ill, and during dismissals or redundancies.

Risk management for sexual harassment

Review your occupational health and safety framework

Sex discrimination and health and safety laws have changed significantly in Australia, and more so in Victoria in recent years. These changes reflect a significant recognition of the impact on the mental wellbeing of employees of violence and other forms of unacceptable behaviour such as harassment, discrimination and bullying. As a result, many workplace frameworks and policies may not reflect current legislative obligations. Some actions to take include:

- Acquiring and keeping up to date with occupational health and safety matters, including in relation to harmful behaviour.
- Gaining an understanding of the hazards and risks associated within the workplace.
- Updating your workplace risk register and framework to reflect the obligation changes, and account for psychosocial hazards and risks, including sexual harassment.
- Providing staff briefing sessions or investing in training to ensure employees are across their legislative responsibilities.
- Developing an internal communications plan about the recent changes to ensure people understand what constitutes a psychosocial hazard including sexual harassment.
- Including discussion questions in performance reviews that seek insight and feedback on workplace culture and address any behavioural concerns with a developmental approach.
- Using staff surveys to determine if there are any risks and insights about workplace culture, psychological safety and inclusivity.
- Prioritising care and support of those impacted by harmful behaviour, including by ensuring appropriate resolution of complaints.
- Ensuring protection from victimisation when employees report harmful behaviour.
- Ensuring compliance with the *Respect@Work* Standards through the development and endorsement of an organisationwide statement or plan. This can be achieved by drawing from the Australian Human Rights Commission's Guidelines for Complying with the Positive Duty under the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* (Cth), and the [Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission's Guideline for Preventing and Responding to Workplace Sexual Harassment](#).

Key workplace obligations under legislation include:

- Workplace obligations under the *Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004* (Vic) to provide a safe workplace, and to control the risk of sexual harassment, so far as is reasonably practicable.

Preventing Sexual Harassment

- The positive duty to eliminate sexual harassment and other forms of gendered violence under both the *Anti-Discrimination and Human Rights Legislation Amendment (Respect at Work) Act 2022* (Cth) and under the *Equal Opportunity Act 2010* (Vic) to eliminate discrimination, sexual harassment and victimisation as far as possible.

Core safety obligations under Occupational Health and Safety Act Vic (2004)

Employers need to:

- Provide and maintain a working environment that is safe and without risks to health (this includes seeking to eliminate, and, if this is not possible, reduce exposure to psychosocial hazards and the risks associated with these).
- Provide or maintain systems of work that are safe and without risks to health.
- Ensuring that the workplace itself is in a condition that is safe and without risks to health.
- Provide adequate facilities for the welfare of employees under their management or control.
- Provide the information, instruction, training or supervision necessary to enable employees to perform their work in a way that is safe and without risks to health.
- Monitor health and working conditions of employees and those under the employer's management and control.
- Provide information to employees concerning health and safety at the workplace, including the names of persons to whom an employee can make a complaint or enquiry about health and safety.
- Consult with employees in relation to safety matters, including when identifying or assessing hazards or risks to health and safety, making decisions about control measures etc.

Risk factors for harmful behaviour

There is a risk of sex discrimination, sexual harassment and other unlawful behaviours in every workplace. The [Model Code of Practice: Managing psychosocial hazards at work](#) and [Model Code of Practice: Sexual and gender-based harassment](#) from Safe Work Australia identify the potential risks for sexual harassment. Many of the factors that increase the likelihood of harassment are commonly present in many industries.

They include situational factors such as the presence of alcohol as well as workplace cultural and structural factors such as gender inequality:

- Poor understanding amongst employees and leaders of the nature, drivers and impacts of sexual and gender-based harassment.
- Acceptance of disrespectful and inappropriate behaviour or tolerance for breaking rules and breaching policies generally.

Preventing Sexual Harassment

- Power imbalances along gendered lines (e.g. workplaces where one gender holds the majority of management and decision-making positions).
- Staff interacting with third parties (such as customers and other professionals in other workplaces).
- A hierarchical workplace with limited opportunities to identify, report or manage harmful behaviours.
- A workplace lacking diversity.
- A workplace divided by gender or gender segregation along occupational lines (e.g. more men in leadership roles and more women in administrative support roles).
- Alcohol is consumed, especially at work social events.
- Staff do not understand sex discrimination, sexual harassment, and other unlawful behaviours.
- The workplace has not responded appropriately or held people accountable for unlawful behaviours in the past (or have not applied a policy or code of conduct consistently).

These risks should be considered and assessed in your workplace.

Considering other forms of discrimination and inequality

In addition to these risks that apply generally, some people who experience more than one form of discrimination are more at risk of sexual harassment. Factors influencing a person's experience of discrimination may include their sex or gender identity, their sexual orientation, whether they have a disability, whether they are from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, whether they are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, whether they are pregnant or breastfeeding, their marital status and their class.

Practice tip

It is good practice to ensure that support materials and key contacts, such as external support services, include information about services and resources for people from diverse backgrounds. For example, an organisation may update their support materials to include culturally safe networks, LGBTQIA+ support services, and disability advocacy groups, to support any staff who may have a disability, identify as LGBTQ+ or experience intersecting forms of discrimination. employees can access professionals who understand their lived experiences.

Risks of non-compliance

Failing to prevent and respond to sexual harassment and gendered violence in the workplace has serious and well-documented consequences for both organisations and individuals. These

Preventing Sexual Harassment

risks are substantiated by national inquiries, workplace surveys, and occupational health research.

Risks to the organisation (employer)

- **Reputational damage:** Allegations of workplace harassment can significantly erode public trust. Research shows that organisational trust drops sharply in the wake of misconduct or leadership inaction.
- **Staff turnover and low retention:** The *Respect@Work* National Inquiry found that many workers who experience sexual harassment leave their job or industry altogether, contributing to higher turnover and loss of talent.¹
- **Legal and financial risk:** Since the introduction of the *positive duty* under the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984 (Cth)*, employers are legally obligated to take proactive measures to prevent harassment. Non-compliance may lead to regulatory investigation, enforceable undertakings, and reputational exposure.²
- **Workplace culture breakdown:** Unsafe workplace cultures foster fear and mistrust in leadership. Psychological safety is compromised, reducing employee engagement and openness to raise concerns.³

Risks for the employee

- **Loss of trust in systems:** Inadequate responses from employers lead to further trauma, deter future reporting, and perpetuate cultures of silence.⁴
- **Career disruption and financial insecurity:** Victim-survivors may face job loss, reduced hours, or permanent exit from their profession, particularly among women, and migrants.⁵
- **Reduced job satisfaction and disengagement:** Workers in psychologically unsafe environments report lower morale, reduced motivation, and decreased job satisfaction.⁶
- **Physical health impacts:** Prolonged harassment can cause stress-related physical conditions such as chronic headaches, gastrointestinal issues, fatigue, and lowered immunity.⁷

Risk Management Process

Managing the risks of sexual harassment is no different to managing other workplace risks, such as trip hazards. Managing harassment risks in the workplace involves four steps, undertaken in consultation with employees:

¹ Australian Human Rights Commission (2020). *Respect@Work: National Inquiry into Sexual Harassment in Australian Workplaces*

² Sex Discrimination Act 1984 (Cth), s 47C (Positive Duty).

³ Edmondson, A. (2019). *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth*.

⁴ Australian Human Rights Commission (2024). *Speaking from Experience: What Needs to Change to Address Workplace Sexual Harassment*.

⁵ Australian Human Rights Commission (2020). *Respect@Work: National Inquiry into Sexual Harassment in Australian Workplaces*

⁶ Diversity Council Australia (2021). *Inclusion@Work Index 2021–2022*.

⁷ Safe Work Australia (2023). *Managing Psychosocial Hazards at Work: Code of Practice*.



Source: Safe Work Australia. (2022). *Managing psychosocial hazards at work: Code of practice*.

1. Identify and Assess Risks

- Identify where sexual or gender-based harassment could occur, even if no incidents have been reported.
- Collect and review data (e.g. complaints, exit interviews, survey data).
- Observe workplace interactions and physical layout.
- Create a confidential reporting system that allows anonymous reports where possible.
- Consider factors like whether employees work in isolation, the provision of services to people with potentially unpredictable behaviour or enforcement activities.

2. Control the Risks

- Use practical controls tailored to your workplace (e.g. redesign workspaces, restrict alcohol at events, ensure employees work in pairs in certain settings).
- Address underlying issues that increase harassment risks, like gender inequality in leadership, lack of policies and tolerance of unlawful behaviour.

3. Maintain and Review Controls

Preventing Sexual Harassment

- Regularly check that control measures are effective, adjusting them as needed.

4. Investigate and Respond to Reports

- Conduct OHS investigations to identify and manage risks, even without formal complaints. Assess whether current controls are adequate.

By implementing a proactive, thorough approach to risk management, workplaces can help ensure a safe, respectful environment for all employees.

For a more detailed list of how to manage these risks, consult the [WorkSafe Victoria guide on managing work-related violence](#).

Unsure about your current risk?

Use the following risk checklist to understand your workplace culture and practice.

- Alcohol is not present onsite or part of work or social events.
- The workplace is gender equitable (for example, people of all genders are evenly distributed across roles and levels of seniority in your workplace; and there are steps in place to address underrepresentation of marginalised groups. This includes no overrepresentation of gender in turnover rates).
- Social activities are inclusive, welcoming, and accessible to all staff.
- Disrespectful or inappropriate comments are rare in staff settings, and when they do occur, people feel safe and supported to speak up.
- Everyone is encouraged and confident to actively participate in meetings and forums.
- There are no offensive materials in the workplace or shared via technology.
- There are no requirements about employee appearance that might make people feel disrespected and vulnerable (such as clothing length or expectations on women to wear makeup).
- There are no areas in your workplace that are isolated or intimidating to enter.
- People are not expected to work late, or to be alone at work or with a customer. Safe staffing and support are prioritised.
- People who have recently started in the workplace are appropriately supported. This includes a thorough induction process where training and development is outlined, in addition to internal and external support processes and contact information.
- All employees have access to appropriate facilities and equipment based on their needs.
- There is a clear process for an employee to report unwanted behaviour, whether from a manager or a co-worker, or third-party, confidentially and without fear of reprisals. Reports are processed and appropriate action is taken in a timely manner.

Preventing Sexual Harassment

- ❑ Perpetrators are responded to appropriately. This includes being made aware the behaviour is not acceptable, and that victimisation is serious misconduct; allowing them to reflect but also being clear on next steps while outlining their support options.
- ❑ Employees are not penalised for reporting inappropriate behaviours – for example by being moved to a different team or restricted in their role and responsibilities.

Managing risk through policies, procedures, education and action planning

Several of the risks for sexual harassment can be controlled through policies and procedures with associated ongoing training including holding perpetrators to account and through gender equality action planning.

Once your policies and procedures have been finalised, it often helps to develop accompanying infographics or process maps to distil key processes like ‘how to make a report’, or ‘specialist support available at (workplace)’. While policies are critical reading for all employees, it helps to provide supporting information in an accessible way.

Power imbalances along gendered lines, and a lack of diversity

This risk can be managed through the promotion of gender equality and inclusion. Specific actions to promote an inclusive workplace:

- Develop and publicise policies that support good conduct, safety and inclusion, equity and diversity.
- Establish an Inclusion & Diversity working group or committee with key decision makers and employee representatives to make sure that safety, respect and inclusion is addressed as an organisational priority.
- Conduct a staff consultation or audit, including an anonymous survey to understand how people across your workforce identify themselves and the experience of different groups of employees and/or engage in employee consultation. You can use the Women’s Legal Service Victoria [Starts with Us template survey](#) to do this.
- Develop supportive family and sexual violence policies and practices to support victims of family and sexual violence.
- Inclusive leaders are those who treat people respectfully and fairly and create an environment where people can be themselves and do their best work. Inclusive leadership is emerging as a critical capability for organisations. It will be important to develop this capability in all senior and executive leaders. Ensure training is:
 - informed by lived experience of discrimination across diverse groups of employees
 - generates understanding and empathy
 - is supported by specialised knowledge and expertise
 - is backed up with resources and supports for diverse staff to access.
- Hold leaders accountable for demonstrating inclusive leadership behaviours and use 360-degree feedback to evaluate performance and increase self-awareness.

Preventing Sexual Harassment

- Introduce inclusive ways of working, including flexible practices, progressive policies and accessible workplaces.
- Introduce a mentorship program where senior leaders actively support and advocate for staff from underrepresented or marginalised groups — helping them access opportunities, build networks, and progress into leadership roles.

You will find more examples of actions you can take in the Women’s Legal [‘Starts with Us’ Action Library](#).

Good practice tip

If you have established practices and are looking to extend your existing practices, the Australian Human Rights Commission have developed the **Speaking from Experience: what needs to change to address workplace sexual harassment report and resources**. They include actionable indicators of good practice and intended outcomes, such as clear reporting pathways, improved accountability, accessible support, and meaningful staff engagement for employers with respect to preventing and responding to sexual harassment.

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

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](https://www.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](https://www.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](https://www.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](https://www.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](https://www.police.vic.gov.au/sexual-offence-child-abuse-teams-centres)