



DIVERSITY
COUNCIL
AUSTRALIA

Myth Busting Sexual Harassment at Work

USING EVIDENCE TO DEBUNK
COMMON MYTHS AND ASSUMPTIONS





CREATING SAFE RESPECTFUL WORKPLACES FOR ALL



23%
of women have experienced sexual harassment at work in Australia in the last year

According to the [Australian Human Rights Commission](#), in the last 12 months, 23% of women and 16% of men have experienced sexual harassment at work in Australia.¹

Sexual harassment has been unlawful in Australian workplaces since 1984 and so for well over three decades, employers have invested in policies, awareness raising, and training.



16%
of men have experienced sexual harassment at work in Australia in the last year

But in 2018, it remains as prevalent as ever.

DCA members are at the forefront of responding to and preventing sexual harassment in organisations across Australia. We know from their experience that a critical stumbling block for organisations are the myths and misconceptions about what sexual harassment is, its impact on organisations and individuals, and what we can do stop it.

In this guide, we use research to debunk some of those common myths and misconceptions. And we provide frameworks for action so that employees and workplaces can stand up for safety and respect at work.

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MYTH
#1

PEOPLE WHO GET OFFENDED JUST CAN'T TAKE A JOKE OR ARE TOO SENSITIVE

REALITY: IT'S NOT FUNNY IF IT'S AT SOMEONE ELSE'S EXPENSE

For both men and women the **MOST COMMON TYPE** of harassment is **offensive sexually suggestive comments or sexist jokes**

People are sometimes surprised to find that what they meant as a joke was experienced as offensive, insulting, intimidating or unwelcome.

It's easy in this situation to assume the other person mustn't have a good sense of humour or is too sensitive.

On the flip side, sometimes people will even try to defend inappropriate comments as a 'joke' even when it was not intended that way.ⁱ

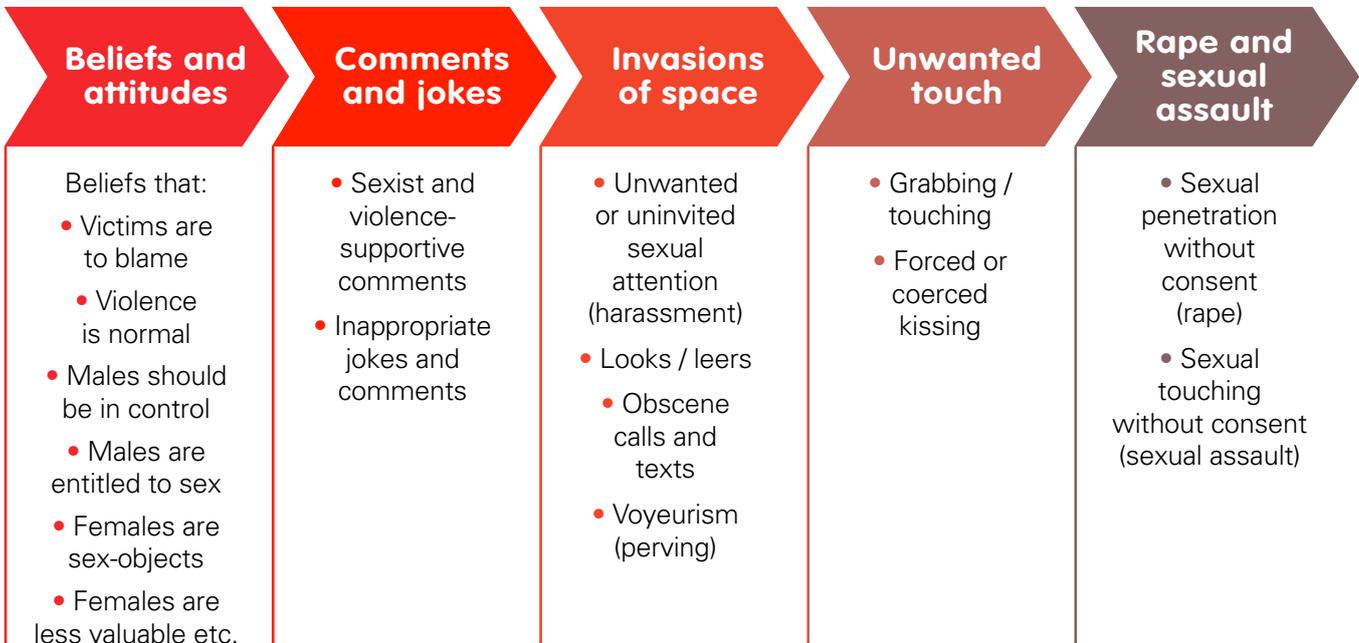
A dripping tap has power

It's easy to dismiss a couple of jokes or comments as insignificant. But casual jokes or comments repeated over time have a cumulative dripping-tap effect.

- Research shows that exposure to frequent small incidents such as sexist jokes or comments causes just as much damage as a 'one-off' more extreme experience (e.g. unwanted sexual touching or threatening retaliation for lack of sexual favours).²
- In fact, all forms of sexism have been shown to be equally harmful to people's workplace well-being – resulting in mental and physical health problems, lower life satisfaction, dissatisfaction with jobs, organisations and relationships with colleagues.³

ⁱ Though it's important to understand that either way, it doesn't matter – the test for harassment is how the comment is *received* by the people who hear it – *not* whether or not the person making the comment meant to offend.

CONTINUUM OF SEXUAL HARM⁴



A joke is often just the start

There is a strong link between sexism and violence against women – sexist and sexual jokes may provide a gateway to sexual harassment and sexual assault.

One way to think about sexual violence is as a continuum of acts starting with less severe behaviours like street/sexual harassment and progressing to crimes like sexual assault.

No one wants to be seen as the one who can't take a joke

Telling someone their joke or comment was offensive is hard – it's far easier to let the joke or comment slide or laugh it off.

'Getting the joke' or 'not rocking the boat' is an important part of fitting in and job success, and we know from research that speaking out can have real consequences for reputations, relationships and careers.⁵

Not all disrespect towards women results in violence. But all violence against women STARTS WITH disrespectful behaviour

Australian research reveals that our general understanding of sexual harassment is limited, and NEARLY ONE QUARTER of Australians see no harm in telling sexist jokes

 **75%**

who formally complain about sexual harassment say **THEY FACE RETALIATION**



Sexual harassment causes **DAMAGE TO VICTIMS' REPUTATION, self-esteem, health and wellbeing**



Witnesses of sexual harassment can also experience **'BYSTANDER STRESS'**

Victims of sexual harassment experience a 'PREDATOR TAX' in their career progression – as in most cases they leave their job, make lateral moves or take pay cuts to avoid rather than take action against the harasser

Harassment costs are no joke

Sexual harassment has a serious and damaging effect on a workplace. Organisations pay a high price for everyday sexism – as do the people involved.

This includes:

- **Costs to complainant personally:** People who are sexually harassed experience damage to their reputation, self-esteem, health, and wellbeing,⁶
- **Risk of retaliation:** 75% of people who formally complain about sexual harassment say they face retaliation,⁷ which in turn leads to people avoiding raising any future concerns and so harassment being 'swept under the carpet',
- **Costs to career progression and pay:** Pay inequity and sexual harassment are linked as women often leave their jobs rather than take action against a harasser.⁸ US research has shown that in most cases, women tend to make lateral moves or take pay cuts, creating a 'predator tax' in their career progression,⁹ and
- **Costs to bystanders:** Sexual harassment not only affects victims – witnesses of sexual harassment can also experience 'bystander stress'.¹⁰ Negative outcomes associated with bystander stress include lower health satisfaction, increased occupational stress, increased team conflict, and lower financial performance.¹¹

So next time you hear the phrase, "They just can't take a joke", try...

Being open to changing what you have always thought is 'normal', respectful or funny. We all come across new information, people, and ideas that challenge our own personal ideas of what's normal. Try to be open to learning and understanding about workplace conversations and banter which can (even if unintentionally) exclude.

Standing in someone else's shoes and seeing it from their perspective.

Instead of attempting to justify your actions (e.g. "I was only joking") or trivialising someone else's feelings (e.g. "You're over-reacting!") try understanding the other person's perspective, and why they felt offended, intimidated or excluded.

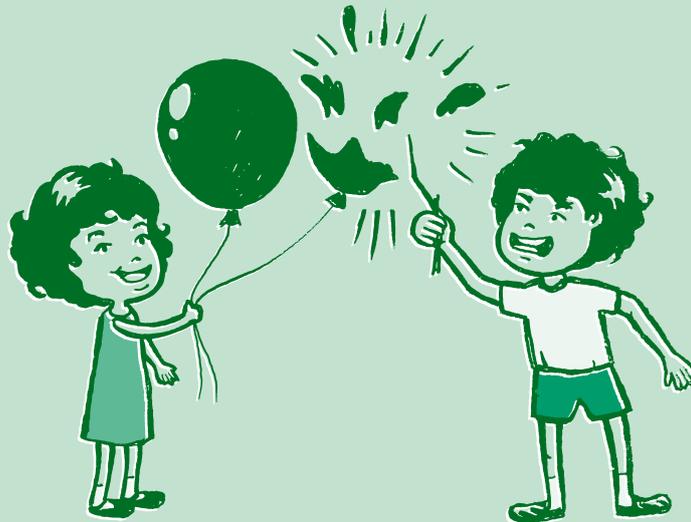
Remembering that walking in someone else's shoes is challenging.

Many of us find it difficult to 'walk in somebody else's shoes' in this way, particularly if we have not experienced exclusion – research shows that if we haven't experienced exclusion we are less likely to recognise situations that stereotype, exclude, or offend.¹²

- We know from research Australians' general understanding of sexual harassment is limited,¹³ and nearly one quarter of us see no harm in telling sexist jokes.¹⁴
- Research shows there is a 'gender gap' when it comes to understanding what constitutes as harassment and whether to intervene, with many men greatly underestimating how prevalent sexual harassment against women is,¹⁵ half of men believing that women mistakenly interpret 'innocent' remarks or acts as being sexist,¹⁶ and men being less likely to recognise behaviours as serious or threatening.¹⁷



TO CREATE A SAFER AND
MORE RESPECTFUL WORKPLACE FOR
ALL, TRY BEING OPEN TO CHANGING
WHAT YOU HAVE ALWAYS THOUGHT IS
'NORMAL', RESPECTFUL OR FUNNY



MYTH #2

IT'S JUST BOYS BEING BOYS

REALITY: ACTUALLY, BOYS ARE BETTER THAN THAT

'Boys will be boys' suggests that boys and men BY THEIR NATURE are bad

While it might seem trivial, expressions like 'boys will be boys' tell us that some antisocial behaviours are acceptable for boys/men and that girls, women, and other people who don't identify as men should simply put up with these behaviours.

It excuses bad behaviour

'Boys will be boys' is not a valid excuse anymore for unwelcome, offensive or unsafe behaviour.

This phrase suggests that boys and men by their nature are bad. That they are inherently immature, insensitive, irresponsible, troublemaking, rude, aggressive, disrespectful – even violent and predatory.¹⁸

In this way, 'boys will be boys' excuses unsafe antisocial behaviours, and suggests women should expect certain treatment from men as it is part of human nature. In fact, it can even shift the blame of disrespectful behaviour onto the victim.¹⁹

It damages men as well as women

Not only is this demeaning of girls and women, it is also fundamentally disrespectful of boys and men – are women the only ones from whom we think we can expect respectful behaviour?²⁰

Rigid ideas about what it means to be a man don't just harm women – they are just as damaging to men.²¹ Research shows that rigid ideas about masculinity are directly linked to poorer health outcomes for men, higher rates of risk-taking behaviour, and higher rates of suicide.²²



RIGID IDEAS ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A MAN DON'T JUST HARM WOMEN – THEY ARE JUST AS DAMAGING TO MEN

It's another way of saying it is ok to treat some people less fairly than others

Phrases like 'boys will be boys' are indicative of deeply entrenched gender inequalities in our society. In other words, it's a way of saying that it is fine and to be expected for women to be treated differently, and less fairly at work.

Those inequalities show up in many ways – for example:

- When we assume the types of work women do are worth less than the types of work men do, women tend to get paid less, and

- It also shows up in ideas about who is best suited to leadership, which tends to show up as fewer women being appointed to leadership roles and childrearing being seen as women's rather than men's work.

So next time you hear poor behaviour being excused as just 'boys being boys', try...

Telling the person excusing the behaviour that, actually, boys and men, are better than that.

Are boys really by their nature disrespectful, intimidating, and offensive? Research shows that views like this are directly linked to POORER HEALTH OUTCOMES FOR MEN, including higher rates of suicide



MYTH #3

YOU SHOULD TAKE IT AS A COMPLIMENT

REALITY: IF IT'S NOT WELCOME, IT'S NOT A COMPLIMENT

More than one in five Australian men believe that women should take being wolf-whistled on the street as a compliment – but when women stand up to their street harasser, research shows it can result in them being abused and assaulted

Anecdotally, people who conduct respectful behaviour training sessions tell us that they often hear the quip, “I wouldn’t mind a bit of sexual harassment!”, particularly from men.

This is damaging as it ignores the serious consequences of sexual harassment for people’s physical and mental health, and the ways this behaviour limits victims’ ability to fully contribute at work.

Compliments should brighten people’s days – not creep them out

Compliments are fine. In fact, research shows that respectful behaviours such as praising work and refraining from interrupting and multitasking during

conversations, help create respectful and inclusive environments²³ that have lower rates of sexual harassment.²⁴

However, even if it’s intended as a compliment, commenting on someone’s appearance in an **unwelcome way** can; belittle their workplace achievements, suggest that they are only valued for their appearance, and make them feel unsafe.

It’s hard to take it as a ‘compliment’ when it keeps happening

Sexual harassment at work is rarely a one-off experience. Most harassing behaviours occur many times a year. A survey of young women in the US found respondents were much more likely to endure multiple instances of a particular type of harassing behaviours than just one single incident:²⁵

- 10% of surveyed women indicated they had been stared and leered at, at work just **once** in the past year,
- While 42% indicated this had happened **four or more times** in the past year.

This was true across every type of harassment including making suggestive comments, trying to discuss sex, displaying offensive images, repeatedly asking out, trying to start a sexual relationship, and unwanted touching.²⁶

Context is key

When trying to work out if giving a compliment on a colleague's appearance is sexual harassment, context is key – try considering what if...

- Compliments were given repeatedly and frequently and only every about the employee's physical appearance and never about their work?
- The employee receiving the compliment was in a less powerful position and so less likely to feel comfortable saying it's not ok – for example, they were: serving a customer or client, on whose business you were depending, more junior than the person giving the compliment, on probation, working in an isolated or remote location, working casually/in insecure employment, one of only a few women in a male-dominated workplace or men in a female-dominated workplace, younger with little workplace experience etc.

Cat-calling happens to girls as young as 11

According to a recent Australian survey, more than one-fifth of men believe that women should take being cat-called on the street as a compliment.²⁷

But the reality is, street harassment makes women feel unsafe. These feelings of being unsafe can begin at

a soberingly young age – a survey of 500 Australian women aged 18 to 25 found one in three were first harassed on the street between the ages of just 11 and 15.²⁸ Of the women surveyed, 83% had been cat-called, 50% had been followed, and 30% had their path blocked or been touched inappropriately (primarily, 95%, by men).

For many women, street harassment is a reality when leaving the house.²⁹

'Compliments' can be a precursor to abuse and assault

A 2018 French [video](#) of a woman being physically assaulted by a sexual harasser on the street after telling them to stop highlights the sad reality that verbal sexual harassment can often turn into abuse and assault.³⁰ Unfortunately, this type of situation is all too familiar – many women are able to recount situations where ignoring, rejecting, or objecting to leers and 'compliments' has escalated into instances of aggressive behaviour.³¹

As the French video demonstrates, standing up to your harasser can be dangerous. Instead, women learn to endure the harassment, internalising it and finding ways to avoid it like changing commute paths and changing plans, and in the case of younger girls, changing out of their school uniforms to avoid sexual harassment.³²

So next time you hear the phrase, "You should take it as a compliment", try...

Suggesting they mainly compliment co-workers about their achievements, quality of work, intelligence or skills.

Inviting the person to imagine walking down a street alone and being yelled at, followed, threatened, or grabbed by a stranger or group of strangers.

IN A GROUP OF 500 AUSTRALIAN WOMEN AGED 18 TO 25:



were first harassed on the street between the AGES OF JUST 11 AND 15



had been CAT-CALLED



had been FOLLOWED



had their PATH BLOCKED or were TOUCHED INAPPROPRIATELY



**MYTH
#4**

**BUT THEY'RE ONE OF
OUR TOP PERFORMERS...**

**REALITY: LACK OF ACTION
NOW WILL COST US MORE
DOWN THE TRACK**

Sometimes employers experience issues with 'superstar' performers who assume they can get away with harassment

Workplaces that permit sexist behaviour, by tacitly approving or 'turning a blind eye', are highly likely to find themselves with much more serious (and expensive) harassment issues to manage down the track.

Don't let "superstars" put your company at risk

Sometimes employers experience issues with 'superstar' performers who assume they can get away with harassment because they are important to an organisation (think high-earning traders who bring in big clients).³³

In fact, research shows that 'superstar' status can actually be a breeding ground for harassment – such a powerful status can reduce 'superstars' uninhibitions,³⁴ any sexist personality traits,³⁵ and result in them being more likely to engage in inappropriate treatment of women.³⁶

Employers can end up with costs as high as \$1.5 million³⁷

The reality is that not doing anything will cost an organisation in the long run. Under the *Sex Discrimination Act* employers may be held liable for workplace sexual harassment³⁸ and the flow on effects from harassment can include both direct and indirect costs to organisations.



TO CREATE A SAFE AND EFFECTIVE WORKPLACE FOR ALL, DEAL WITH THE ISSUE, DON'T SIDELINE THE VICTIM. IT WILL BE GOOD FOR EVERYONE!

- The most easily calculated costs for employers are the legal bills associated with legal action and settlements, but other direct costs include the costs of dealing with complaints, and the costs of delivering anti-sexual harassment training.
- Indirect costs include lower productivity and morale, higher turnover and absenteeism, and reputational harm to an organisation's public image.³⁹

Therefore, taking action to prevent sexual harassment is simply just good for business.

Don't just move the victim to another area

Sideline victims can be substantially more costly than taking action against perpetrators.

In a recent Australian case where a woman made a sexual harassment complaint, instead of the sexual harasser being removed from the project they worked on together, the victim was the one sidelined. The victim was awarded \$130,000 in compensation in recognition of her lost earnings.⁴⁰

Sexual harassment damages physical and psychological health

Studies show that sexual harassment can cause an increased risk of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder, as well as diminished self-esteem, self-confidence, and psychological wellbeing.⁴¹

Sexual harassment at work can also:

- Produce depressive symptoms in both women and men, irrespective of whether they had previously experienced harassment or were already distressed,⁴²
- Make people more prone to sickness, illness and accident, and not just around the time they experienced the harassment, but also years later,⁴³ and
- Put women at a higher risk for hypertension and sleep disorders.⁴⁴

So next time you hear the phrase, "But they're one of our best performers", try...

Calculating the direct and indirect costs of retaining a 'serial offender' to make it clear that doing nothing to address this performance issue is a serious liability and financial risk for your organisation.

Employers can end up with sexual harassment costs as high as \$1.5 million



Studies show that sexual harassment can cause increased risk of ANXIETY, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder



Indirect costs of sexual harassment include LOWER PRODUCTIVITY and morale, higher turnover and absenteeism



MYTH
#5

**IT'S ALL GONE TOO FAR –
WE CAN'T SAY OR DO ANYTHING
THESE DAYS!**

**REALITY: IF IT'S RESPECTFUL
AND SAFE, IT'S OK**

40% of Australian women have been sexually harassed at work in the last 5 years.

But only one in five ever tell their company about it.

In fact, most try to avoid the harasser or ignore or endure the harassment.

Some people think that in the era of **#metoo** any innocent interaction at work could be seen as sexual harassment, and that it will damage morale if people aren't allowed to say or do anything fun at work. **#metoo** isn't about being the 'fun police' – it's about making sure the way we interact with each other at work is respectful and safe, for everyone.

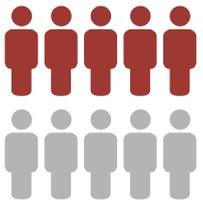
Raising awareness of a problem can feel like it's out of control

As one commentator⁴⁵ recently put it: *"the #MeToo movement has been extremely successful in initiating necessary and impactful conversations surrounding the topic of sexual misconduct and workplace harassment, [but] it has also shed light on the decades of harassment that have been swept under the rug... Though the subject matter of the #MeToo movement may seem like a shocking new discovery to some, women have been aware of these injustices for most of their lives."*

Recent Australian research⁴⁶ found that:



Fewer than **one in five victims** complain to their company



Half the people who made a formal complaint **report no changes were made** at their organisation as a result of the complaint

UK research⁴⁷ put the figures even higher:

70% of people who report unwanted sexual behaviour to their employers said that there was **no change****

16% reported that they were **treated worse** as a result of reporting unwanted sexual behaviour

Actually, very few victims raise complaints in organisations

Women will often complain to family or even on social media, but most don't tell their companies. If they confide in anyone, usually it is a colleague or friend rather than someone in a position to address the problem.⁴⁸

- Fewer than one in five victims complain to their company.⁴⁹
- In fact, victims' most common responses are actually to avoid the harasser, deny or downplay the gravity of the situation, or attempt to ignore, forget, or endure the behaviour.⁵⁰

People often don't complain as reporting leads to no action – other than retaliation

Some people have expressed scepticism about the recent wave of harassment claims, questioning why women didn't come forward sooner.

Women often feel that sexual harassment is so widespread and commonplace that it is hopeless trying to challenge it.⁵¹

And research suggests they may be right:

- The Australian Human Rights Commission found that about half the people who made a formal complaint report no changes were made at their organisation as a result of the complaint.⁵²
- UK research puts the figure even higher – 70% of people who report unwanted sexual behaviour to their employers said that there was no change and 16% reported that they were treated worse as a result.⁵³

So it's not surprising that many victims believe a formal complaint would be viewed as an overreaction.⁵⁴ And that about one in five victims would rather resign than take action.⁵⁵



The #METOO MOVEMENT has been extremely successful in initiating necessary conversations about workplace sexual harassment



Research found that about ONE IN FIVE victims of workplace sexual harassment would RATHER RESIGN THAN TAKE ACTION

Some people have expressed scepticism about the recent wave of harassment claims

GENERALLY NOT OFFENSIVE	Common remarks on such things as hair-style and dress	<i>"You look nice today," "I like your haircut," etc.</i>
AWKWARD/ MILDLY OFFENSIVE	Comments involving or implying gender distinctions unfavourable to women	<i>"We can't speak frankly around you women anymore."</i>
OFFENSIVE	Gender-insensitive or superior manner.	Holding a woman's arm while talking to her; uninvited hugs; making stereotypical jokes about women, blondes, brunettes, red-heads, etc.
HIGHLY OFFENSIVE	Intentionally denigrating remarks	Comments on physical attributes used to embarrass, insult or demean.
EVIDENT SEXUAL MISCONDUCT	Usually crude or physically intrusive	Looking a woman up and down in a sexually suggestive manner; grabbing, unwelcome holding, touching or kissing; ignoring a woman's expressed disinterest in a personal or intimate relationship; crude jokes that demean women; describing women with such terms as <i>"slut"</i> or <i>"frigid."</i>
EGREGIOUS SEXUAL MISCONDUCT	Typically involves coercion, sexual abuse, or assault	Overt sexual behaviour while a woman is present; pressing against a woman suggestively; threatening or implying career damage to a woman who refuses to engage in sex or sexual behaviour; forcing or coercing a woman to have sex.

Adapted from *'Spectrum of Sexual Misconduct at Work'*⁵⁶

ONLY 1.4%
of formal complaints are found to be trivial, vexatious, frivolous, misconceived, or lacking in substance

'Fake' complaints are actually few and far between

Rather than #metoo leading to a raft of false accusations against innocent people, the Australian Human Rights Commission's Sex Discrimination complaint statistics indicate only 1.4% of claims made are found to be trivial, vexatious, frivolous, misconceived, or lacking in substance.

So next time you hear the phrase, "it's all gone too far", try...

Showing the person the research in this Myth buster, which demonstrates that while #metoo may feel like a lot to some people, very few

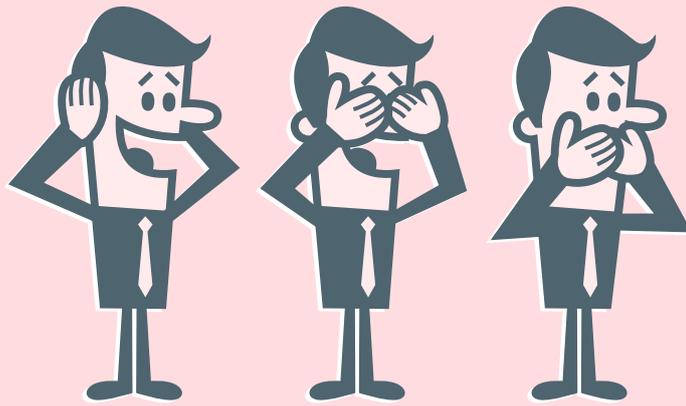
victims of sexual harassment actually make complaints and 'fake' complaints are few and far between.

Using **Reardon's Spectrum of Sexual Misconduct at Work**⁵⁷ to help communicate to employees what and why certain behaviours are sexual harassment.

It can also assist in allowing employees experiencing sexual harassment to report their concerns, and make it easier to explain to the harasser when and how they have crossed a boundary.



**RAISING AWARENESS IS
THE FIRST STEP TO CREATING
A SAFE AND RESPECTFUL
WORKPLACE FOR ALL**



MYTH #6

I DON'T WANT TO GET INVOLVED – IT'S NONE OF MY BUSINESS

REALITY: IT'S EVERYONE'S BUSINESS – THE STANDARD WE WALK PAST IS THE STANDARD WE ACCEPT

Going along with sexist or sexual jokes can actually create an environment that tolerates problematic sexual behaviour

The Australian Human Rights Commission⁵⁸ found that 40% of workplace sexual harassment incidents were witnessed by at least one other person. Yet in the majority of cases (69%) the witness did not intervene.

Often people do not think it is appropriate to get involved if they witness sexual harassment. Some men fear that others, especially other men, may perceive them as being too 'soft' or 'sensitive' if they intervene in sexual harassment.⁵⁹ However, bystander interventions in a range of other areas have shown that equipping everyone to stop harassment is beneficial in reducing harm.

Playing along or 'turning a blind eye' can actually make things worse

Research⁶⁰ shows that going along with sexist or sexual jokes can actually create an environment that tolerates problematic sexual behaviour.

- Here, jokes end up giving permission to people to express sexist attitudes.
- In practice, that means that when *some* people hear sexist jokes, it tells them it's ok to think less of women, and it can actually trigger sexist behaviour.

So not intervening or calling out someone when we hear an off-colour joke or comment can actually allow these negative attitudes to fester and create an environment in which problematic sexual behaviour is seen as normal.

Particularly noteworthy is that when women tell sexist jokes, they may have an even greater disinhibiting impact on sexist men's attitudes than when men tell them.⁶¹

Speaking out breaks the social spell of approval

Active bystanders or 'upstanders' are vital in reducing harm. Speaking up against sexually harassing behaviour when witnessing it or speaking out against a sexist joke can help break the social spell of approval and encourage others to follow your lead.

Men have an especially important active bystander role. Research shows that men receive more positive reactions and experience fewer negative consequences than women when confronting sexism.⁶²

What's more, most men overestimate the level of approval from other men of sexist behaviour. So standing up to sexist jokes, or saying something about sexually harassing behaviour not only stops the behaviour from happening, it can empower more men to speak out as well.

We all need to be active bystanders – and stand up for safety and respect at work

It can be challenging to confront inappropriate workplace behaviour, especially when it's coming from powerful or influential people in our organisation. In fact, research suggests we confront sexist behaviour less than half the time we encounter it.⁶³

But to really make a difference when it comes to sexual harassment, we need a critical mass of people to stop standing silently by and instead stand up for safety and respect at work.

So next time you hear the phrase, "I don't want to get involved – it's none of my business", try...

Suggesting these non-confrontational ways to confront someone about inappropriate comments⁶⁴

"I'm taking a moment to be sure I heard you right."

"This seems like a good time to take a break – to reflect on what was just said."

"If I look perplexed, it's because I'm thinking about how to give you the benefit of the doubt."

"I suggest we step back for a moment, as something just went awry."

"Of all the things I thought you might say, that certainly wasn't one of them."

"If I said what I'm thinking, we'd both be out of line."

"For two people who respect each other, we're certainly off course today."

"Do you want to run that by me again in a less personal way?"

"Did you really say that?"

Being an active bystander by⁶⁵:

- Talking to the person experiencing harassment, listening to them, acknowledging what has happened, and assisting them to find information on how to make a complaint
- Asking HR or your manager about displaying the workplace sexual harassment policy prominently in your workplace
- Interrupting incidents of sexual harassment or the situations which lead to harassment
- Organising sexual harassment training for your workplace
- Talking to a union delegate or union about raising awareness of sexual harassment in the workplace
- Speaking out against the social norms and inequalities supportive of sexual harassment.

Standing up to sexist jokes, or saying something about sexually harassing behaviour not only stops the behaviour from happening, it can empower more people to speak out as well!



We need a critical mass of people to stop standing silently by and instead stand up for safety and respect at work



Research shows that men receive more positive reactions and experience fewer negative consequences than women when confronting sexism



**MYTH
#7**

**IT ONLY HAPPENS TO
(STRAIGHT-CIS)ⁱⁱ WOMEN**

**REALITY: IT HAPPENS TO
PEOPLE OF ALL GENDERS AND
ALL SEXUAL ORIENTATIONS**

More than half of Australian men have been sexually harassed at some point in their lifetimes

It happens to men

Although sexual harassment disproportionately impacts young women, men can be sexually harassed too.

- In the last 12 months, 16% of Australian men have experienced sexual harassment at work, and
- Over half (56%) of men have been sexually harassed at some point in their lifetime.⁶⁶

What’s more, the rates of sexual harassment for men has been increasing over recent years.⁶⁷

Men experience problems with outdated male norms and stereotypes. Research shows that men are more likely to be sexually harassed if they are pro-feminist and behave in ways that

differ from “traditional masculinity” (i.e. not displaying traits traditionally viewed as masculine in Western society e.g. aggression and assertiveness). This is regardless of their sexual orientation.⁶⁸

Men are also more likely to be sexually harassed by other men than by women.⁶⁹

For men, stigma attached to sexual harassment can be a barrier to reporting it. Research shows men are more tolerant of sexual harassment towards men than they are to women.⁷⁰ Societal norms that say sexual harassment is not a male issue, the belief that men can’t truly be sexually harassed by a woman, or the idea that being harassed by another man implicates their own sexuality, can all stop men coming forward.

ii **What is a straight-cis woman?** Cisgender is a term used to describe people who identify their gender as the same as what was assigned to them at birth (male or female). The term ‘cis’ is a Latin word meaning the same as. So a cis-woman is essentially someone who is not trans.

It happens to LGBTIQ+ people – at alarmingly high levels

Australian LGBTIQ+ workers are almost 50% more likely to have experienced harassment and/or discrimination in the past year than non-LGBTIQ+ workers.⁷¹

People who are bisexual are the most likely to have been sexually harassed at work – 90% will have been sexually harassed in their lifetime.⁷²

It's even worse for women who aren't straight

DCA's *Out At Work* research revealed that women who are not straight often experience sexual harassment as a result of being fetishised for their sexuality:

"Men just tend to get a bit creepy around bisexual women"

"I had sexual overtures that came as a consequence of coming out at work"

Almost all (92%) women who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, queer, asexual, aromantic, undecided, not sure, questioning or other have experienced sexual harassment in their lifetime.⁷³

This can range from creepy comments, to being propositioned, being taken to sex-clubs for work events, to constant sexual overtones.

Fetishising, propositioning or making inappropriate comments about someone's private life is a form of sexual harassment.

It's not ok to ask these sorts of questions of any colleague or co-worker – whether they are LGBTIQ+ or not.

Trans and gender diverse people cop it too

Non-binary and gender diverse people^{iv} (i.e. people who have gender identities that are not exclusively male or female)⁷⁴ were also very likely (89%) to have experienced sexual harassment in their lifetime. Trans people experience a particular form of harassment where they are repeatedly asked intrusive questions about their medical history.

*"As a trans guy, I don't feel comfortable revealing anything about surgery, because as a trans person, the assumption everyone makes is that it's about genitals, that is the first question people ask, 'What's in your pants?'"*⁷⁵

Work is not the place to talk about someone's medical history. If you wouldn't ask the question of a cisgender or heterosexual person, don't ask an LGBTIQ+ person.

So the next time you hear the phrase, "It only happens to [straight-cis] women", try...

Reminding them that sexual harassment happens to people of all genders and all sexual orientations

Suggesting that they read the stories and examples in DCA's *Out At Work* research report. Real stories can be a powerful way of helping someone stand in another person's shoes.

Raising workplace awareness that sexual harassment happens to men, and encouraging everyone to intervene if they witness something inappropriate. The attitudes that discourage men from reporting sexual harassment are held by women and men, so standing up and saying something can really make a difference.

Take the time to listen to people's stories – this can be a powerful way of understanding their perspective and experience



92%
of WOMEN WHO ARE NOT STRAIGHT have been sexually harassed at some point in their life



89%
of non-binary and gender diverse people were also very likely to have experienced SEXUAL HARASSMENT in their lifetime

iii 'LGBTIQ+' refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/ gender diverse, intersex, and queer – the '+' recognises that LGBTIQ doesn't include a range of other terms that people identify with, or use to describe themselves.

iv Gender diverse and non-binary refers to people who do not identify as a woman or a man. In the same way that sexual orientation and gender expression are not binaries, gender identity is not a binary either. It is important to challenge our thinking beyond the binary constructs of male and female.



**MYTH
#8**

IT'S MAINLY JUST SENIOR MEN TAKING ADVANTAGE OF THEIR SECRETARIES

REALITY: SEXUAL HARASSMENT IS ABOUT POWER; AND POWER AT WORK ISN'T JUST ABOUT SENIORITY

Sexual harassment is a form of dominance, control and power that shows up at work in many ways

Seniority does make a difference

When we think about sexual harassment, the image that often comes to mind is a senior man, harassing his secretary or a more junior staff member. In fact, 22% of women have been harassed by a manager – their own (17%) or another (7%) in the past 5 years.⁷⁶

We know from research that harassment flourishes in workplaces where men dominate in management and women have little power.⁷⁷ In these workplaces, have less ability to speak up and influence change and men feel pressure to accept other men's sexualised behaviour.⁷⁸

Having said that, you are still more likely to be sexually harassed by a co-worker at the same level, than by your boss.⁷⁹

But power shows up in many other ways

Sexual harassment is a form of dominance, control and power that shows up at work in many ways.⁸⁰ Just because a perpetrator is not your boss does not mean that power dynamics are not at play.

While a co-worker may not have official power over their colleagues in title and responsibilities, their influence in other ways (e.g. as a co-worker who is well liked by their team or

supervisor, or who brings in large contracts) can easily lead to a power imbalance resulting in sexual harassing behaviour towards those at the same seniority level.

Male-dominated workplaces make a difference

Research suggests harassment is common in organisations where few women hold the 'core' jobs – female firefighters, police officers, construction workers, and miners, as well as women in the tech industry are frequently harassed because they're outnumbered.⁸¹

Customer-focused workplaces make a difference

According to one U.S. study, about ten per cent of women who are sexually harassed at work were harassed by a client, customer, or patient.⁸² The U.S. study also suggests that these figures can be even higher in particular industries such as healthcare or retail.

The old adage "the customer is always right" can create a one-sided power imbalance, so particularly in the context of large contracts, clients or customers can believe that they are entitled to behave in sexually harassing and aggressive ways.

It can be even harder for people to take action where the harassment is perpetrated by a client or customer if the employee's compensation may be directly tied to customer satisfaction or client service. For example:

- Hospitality workers relying on tips can feel compelled to put up with harassment rather than missing out on tips,⁸³ or
- Salespeople who rely on commission may put up with harassment to make a sale.

Nurses and other healthcare workers who are harassed by patients face a particular difficulty as they have ethical obligations to treat patients. What's more, evidence from the U.S. suggests that some workplaces also consciously or subconsciously, tolerate harassing behaviour rather than intervene on the workers' behalf.⁸⁴

Physical isolation and decentralisation make a difference

Workers who are physically isolated or have few opportunities to work with others (such as cleaners working alone, people attending to hotel rooms alone, and agricultural workers) can also be at a higher risk of harassment.⁸⁵ This is often because harassers can easily access such workers and there are no witnesses to the harassment or bystanders who could intervene.

This can also be the case for decentralised workplaces where frontline staff and managers are far removed from corporate offices and can feel (or sometimes actually be) unaccountable to the organisation for their behaviour. Sometimes harassment can remain unaddressed because frontline staff simply don't know how to address workplace harassment issues.⁸⁶

Youth and inexperience make a difference

Though sexual harassment can occur to workers of all ages, statistics show that young workers experience the highest levels, with three in four between the ages of 18 and 29 experiencing sexual harassment over the course of their lifetime.⁸⁷ Workplace inexperience and vulnerability are key reasons for this. Younger workers are often at the beginning of their careers or in



Workers who are **PHYSICALLY ISOLATED** or have few opportunities to work with others can also be at a **HIGHER RISK** of harassment



YOUNG WORKERS experience the **HIGHEST LEVELS** of workplace sexual harassment, with three in four between the ages of 18 and 29 experiencing harassment over the course of their lifetime



Sometimes harassment can remain unaddressed because frontline staff **SIMPLY DON'T KNOW HOW** to address workplace harassment issues

Workers who are in non-permanent casual, contract, or agency employment are especially at risk of being sexually harassed

non-permanent work, usually in lower positions of power that make them more prone to harassment and less confident to speak out against their harasser/s.⁸⁸

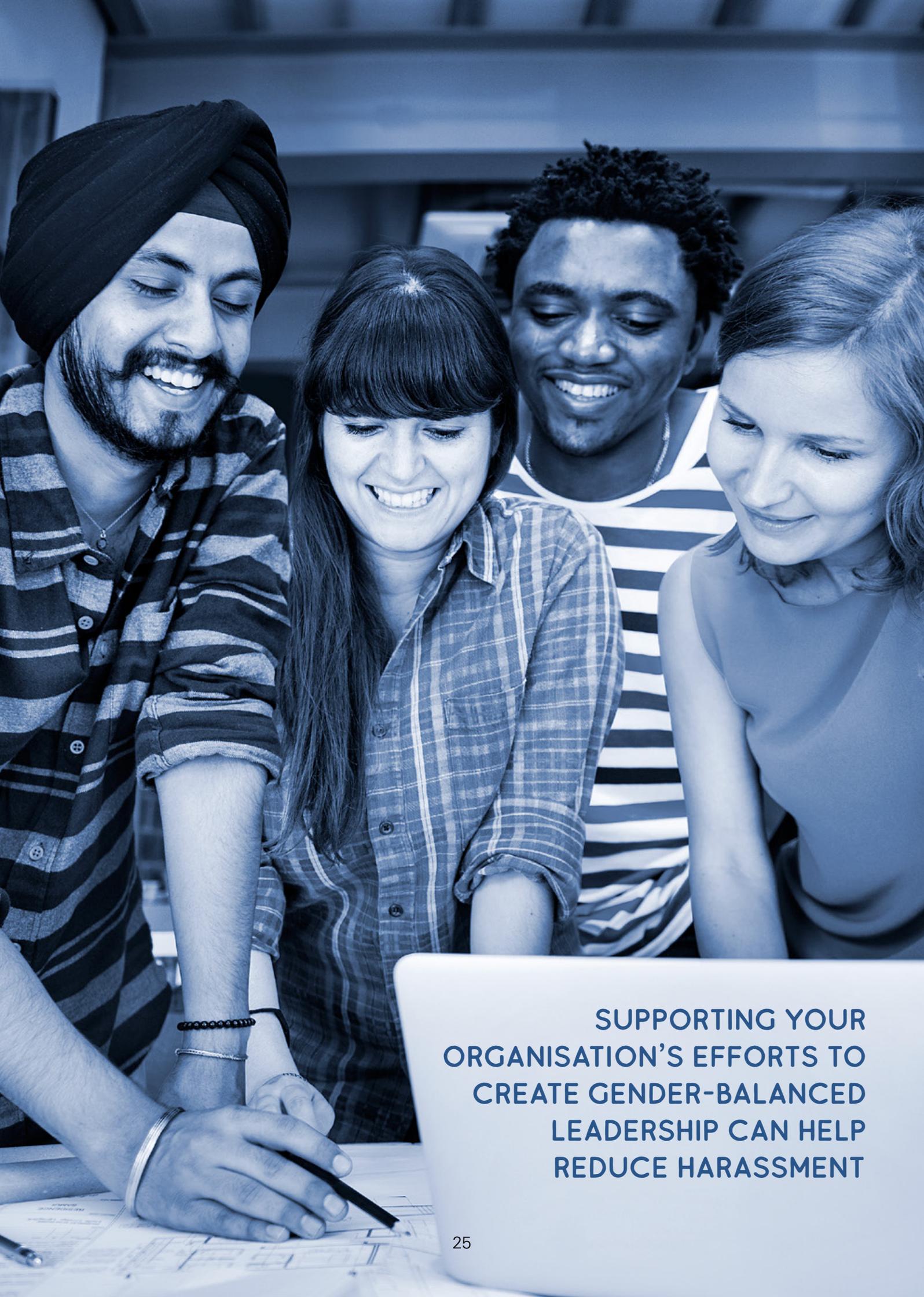
Contract or casual work makes a difference

Workers who are in non-permanent casual, contract, or agency employment are especially at risk of being sexually harassed.⁸⁹ Without permanency, and typically facing low job security, these employees are by default already in a lower position of power. As a result, employees in this type of employment are less likely to report instances of sexual harassment, often for fear of losing their job. This is worrying given the current move towards workforce casualisation. Information on sexual harassment policies, reporting channels, and available support must be considered as equally important for non-permanent employees as it is for permanent employees.

So next time you hear the phrase, “It’s mainly senior men harassing their secretaries”, try...

Remembering that power shows up in lots of ways and role imbalances, or financial and job security, are specifically recognised as factors that must be considered when determining if something is sexual harassment.⁹⁰

Supporting your organisation’s efforts to create gender-balanced leadership as this can reduce harassment. Where there is gender disparity in power in an organisation, sexual harassment increases. Men sometimes use sexual harassment as a tool against women in power. But, when power is shared across gender, harassment decreases. The best way to deal with this sort of power play is to ensure that your organisation has equal leadership of men and women.⁹¹



**SUPPORTING YOUR
ORGANISATION'S EFFORTS TO
CREATE GENDER-BALANCED
LEADERSHIP CAN HELP
REDUCE HARASSMENT**



ORGANISATIONS CAN STAND UP FOR SAFETY AND RESPECT AT WORK

1 START WITH A PARTNERSHIP APPROACH



Ensure D&I initiatives involve people from dominant and minority groups (e.g., men and women, or non-LGBTIQ+ and LGBTIQ+ people) as active and equal partners leading the strategic approach.

2 STRATEGIC ORGANISATIONAL APPROACH



Ensure a strategic organisational approach to preventing and responding to sexual harassment – try Catalyst’s 4 pronged ‘Prepare, Prevent, Respond, Transform’ approach.⁹²

3 ENSURE EFFECTIVE VOICE SYSTEMS



Review your organisational systems to ensure there are effective voice systems to enable staff to speak up, and be rewarded – not punished or marginalised – for doing so. But remember do not rely only on grievance procedures to ensure your work environment is inclusive.

4 KEY MESSAGING



Consider key messaging for bystander initiatives – e.g., moral courage, inclusive communication, *“Hey, that’s my sister!!!”*

5 BYSTANDER INTERVENTION



Invest in a bystander intervention to identify – and prevent – unacceptable behaviour, and motivate employees who witness or hear about inappropriate behaviour to speak up.

6

EMPOWER BYSTANDERS



Empower bystanders to be agents of change by:

- Asking questions such as, “How could we let this happen?” and “How can we prevent it from happening again?”
- Making perpetrators accountable – not their targets, and
- Providing bystanders with the words to say to a perpetrator such as, “What you said earlier really bothered me” or “I wonder if you realise how that comes across?”

7

TRAIN BYSTANDERS



This equips everyone in the workplace to stop harassment, instead of offering people two roles no one wants: harasser or victim. A U.S. study of soldiers who received bystander prevention training found that there was a significant increase in soldiers reporting that they took some form of action when they witnessed assault or harassment.⁹³

8

RECOGNISE THE GENDER GAP



Ensure your training recognises the ‘gender gap’. When it comes to harassment, research has found that:

- Many men greatly underestimate how prevalent sexual harassment against women is,⁹⁴
- Men often have a poorer understanding of sexual harassment than women do, in fact, half believe that women mistakenly interpret ‘innocent’ remarks or acts as being sexist,⁹⁵ and men are also more likely to believe sexual harassment is a form of sexual flirtation, and less likely to recognise behaviours as serious or threatening,⁹⁶
- Men who witness inappropriate behaviour can be more reluctant to intervene than women, particularly in front of other men, as they can overestimate other men’s comfort with problematic behaviour,⁹⁷ and
- This lack of understanding of the extent of sexual harassment is holding back organisations’ efforts to address it.

9

‘DRIPPING TAP’ SEXISM



Promote Laura Bates’ TED talk on [Everyday Sexism](#) to educate about the prevalence of everyday sexism.

10

EFFECTIVE TRAINING



Make sure your training is effective. Research⁹⁸ shows that the most impactful training, is at least four hours, in person, interactive and tailored for the particular workplace and presented by an employees’ supervisor or an external expert (not an HR official with no direct oversight).

YOUR 'GO TO' RESOURCES

Understanding What Sexual Harassment Is

- Use these videos from the [Stop it at the Start](#) campaign to start a conversation about respectful relationships.
- Watch this [Time's Up PSA](#) for a humorous understanding of what is, and isn't sexual harassment at work.
- Watch Laura Bates' [TED talk](#) on Everyday Sexism.
- Learn about consent: Watch this [Consent Is Everything, Tea and Consent](#) video.
- Follow the **Five Steps to Inclusive Language** in DCA's [Words At Work: Building inclusion Through the Power of Language](#) report and language guides.
- Check out DCA's [Out at Work](#) for a framework for creating more LGBTIQ+ inclusive workplaces.
- Check out the [RESPECT website](#) to learn about recognising what disrespectful behaviour looks like and how to have a conversation about respectful behaviour.

Preventing and Responding to Sexual Harassment

- Use the Australian Human Rights Commission's [Ending Workplace Sexual Harassment](#) employer resource to develop strategies to communicate to staff about boundaries and creating a healthy and safe work environment based on respect and courtesy.
- Review Australian Human Rights Commission's [Recognising and Responding to Sexual Harassment in the Workplace: Information for Employees](#).
- Improve your complaint process by updating your policy in line with the Australian Human Rights Commission's [Good Practice Guidelines for Internal Complaint Processes](#).⁹⁹
- Check out Catalyst's [Sexual Harassment in the Workplace: what employers need to know](#) guide.

Engaging Men in Preventing and Responding to Sexual Harassment

- Watch DCA's [Can't Take a Joke: We Need Courage to Call It](#) event recording to get a better understanding of the insidious effect of inappropriate jokes.
- Use DCA's [Engaging Men on Gender Equality](#) guidelines to develop more effective ways to engage men to achieve gender equality at work.¹⁰⁰
- Use the Male Champions of Change, [We Set the Tone](#) report for practical tips on how to respond to inappropriate sexist behaviour.¹⁰¹
- Try using 'information escrows' for harassment reporting. This is an idea from the U.S. whereby a complaint is date-stamped, and the victim can request that the complaint is only reported if there is another complaint against the same perpetrator.¹⁰²

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