

Change the Culture, Change the System: Urgent Action needed to End Sexual Harassment at Work

Everyone deserves to feel safe and respected at work. Our clients tell us that the system is failing to stop sexual harassment occurring and to meaningfully address it when it does. We have worked with leading organisations across the legal, health, community and government sectors to identify the best solutions.

Here are the top five reforms that will make sure we change the culture and the system.

Address the causes of sexual harassment

“I would constantly ask people to stop making these remarks, which would include jokes about family violence and gender stereotypes, including women’s place being in the kitchen.” **Jessica**

Sexual harassment is mostly perpetrated by men and the majority of victims are women. 83% of all clients we assisted with a workplace sexual harassment complaint in the last three years, were women. Traditional values about the roles of men and women in society are an underlying cause of sexual harassment. We need to invest in programs that address this as part of a holistic strategy to prevent violence against women and promote gender equality.

Employers and regulators must do more to prevent sexual harassment

“Left unchecked, the harassment intensified, and my health started to suffer. Following my complaints, I started being undermined and treated in a demeaning way by management.” **Chloe**

Work Health and Safety agencies need to play a more active role in preventing sexual harassment as a serious workplace health and safety issue. They should be resourced to educate and guide employers about how to create systems and a culture that prevents sexual harassment from occurring in the first place. As well, Human rights commissions should be empowered and resourced to investigate and enforce compliance with anti-discrimination laws.

Employers must be legally required to take proactive steps to prevent sexual harassment and, when they fail to do so, agencies must take action.

Create a fairer complaints systems



“I felt like the process was a battle and afterwards I didn’t have anything left in me to keep pursuing my rights. I felt depleted.” **Fiona**

People who experience sexual harassment should have access to complaint processes that are fair and recognise the challenges faced by victims, both in their workplace and in the legal system. The law needs to be changed to better protect victims of sexual harassment against backlash and victimisation for raising concerns at work.

Better psychological support for victims



*“I would have liked to have someone tell me that I haven’t done anything wrong and to let me know what I could have done for self-care and referral to some doctors. Kind words are appreciated as it was hard to survive.” **Penny***

Sexual harassment harms the psychological and physical health of victims and people who witness it. As a result, many people decide not to complain. There is no free and widely accessible counselling service for people who have experienced sexual harassment. We need well resourced support services to help victims recover from the harm caused by sexual harassment.

Help people speak up about sexual harassment



“I did not have the emotional resources or social supports needed to go to court and fight my employer, so I settled my claim for a small pay out rather than taking the case further.” **Alice**

Only 1 in 5 people who experience sexual harassment make an official complaint. An accessible and confidential online reporting tool that helps people to report problem behaviour and seek help could encourage more people to speak up when they experience sexual harassment.

Together we can stop sexual harassment. We call on governments across Australia to take urgent and coordinated action to implement these reforms.

To find out more about our work with the Power to Prevent coalition and to read our submission to the Australian Human Rights Commission see: <https://www.legalaid.vic.gov.au/about-us/strategic-advocacy-and-law-reform/change-culture-change-system-end-sexual-harassment-work>