



SYSTEMS FOR RESPECT

Interventions to reduce workplace sexual harassment

Summary

August 2024

Sexual harassment is a pervasive issue that affects all industries and areas in Australia: one in 3 workers has experienced sexual harassment at work.¹

Comcare reviewed the research evidence on workplace sexual harassment interventions, looking at 14 studies on the effectiveness of interventions to reduce and prevent workplace sexual harassment.

What we found

A multi-pronged approach is most effective in preventing and addressing workplace sexual harassment.

Single interventions, such as training, can have a positive effect on single outcomes, but they are less effective when used in isolation – especially if the organisational culture overlooks gender-based harassment.

A range of interventions, including comprehensive policies, complaints systems, and wide-reaching training and education needs to be supported by strong leadership that models anti-harassment and gender-equal values and behaviours.

¹ Australian Human Rights Commission, *Time for respect: fifth national survey on sexual harassment in Australian workplaces*, AHRC, 2022.

A closer look at different interventions

Complaints systems

Workplaces with formal complaints systems had a lower incidence of workplace sexual harassment.

Complaints systems are more likely to be effective when:

- workers believe complaints will be taken seriously and investigated
- offensive behaviour is discussed with perpetrators
- appropriate action is taken
- complainants' privacy is respected
- complainants aren't encouraged to drop complaints
- complainants are kept informed about the progress of their case

Sexual harassment policies

Comprehensive, clear policies can increase workers' understanding and reporting of workplace sexual harassment. But policies alone are not enough, especially in masculine and hierarchical work cultures.

Policies are more likely to be effective when:

- the organisational culture condemns workplace sexual harassment and supports workers at all levels to address it
- they are explicitly 'zero tolerance' – this is associated with higher reporting.

Training

Training can improve knowledge of workplace sexual harassment; increase people's skills and confidence to respond to and report it; build trust in leadership; and reduce unwanted sexual conduct.

Training is more likely to be effective when:

- the content of training is right – regardless of whether the training is conducted in-person or online.

Bystander interventions

Bystander interventions occur when actors who are not the direct targets of workplace sexual harassment get involved. Overall, they are limited in preventing further harassment or redressing harm, although there are factors that contribute to their effectiveness.

Bystander interventions are more likely to be effective when:

- the intervention is immediate and assertive
- bystanders feel comfortable to intervene because they believe the organisation does not tolerate gender-based harassment and can deal with the situation fairly
- managers and senior staff proactively create a culture that enables bystander intervention and reporting.

This is a summary of the research intended to assist employees and employers with general advice. It does not reflect an official Comcare position or policy.

Find out more

- **Read the full review** | [Systems for respect: interventions to reduce workplace sexual harassment – Rapid review](#)
- **Visit the Comcare website** | [Harassment including sexual harassment](#)