

# “Just another day in retail”:

## Understanding and addressing workplace sexual harassment in the Australian retail industry

### Context

- **Retail is a vital national industry.** The industry employs 9 per cent of all Australians, is the second largest employer of Australian women, is the third most feminised industry in the country,<sup>1</sup> and the second largest employer of young workers.
- Sexual harassment in the workplace harms employee wellbeing, career progression and earnings, team cohesion, and the success of businesses and the national economy.
- Despite the significance of the retail industry in Australia, there is limited research available on sexual harassment in retail workplaces.
- This research aims to understand the prevalence and nature of sexual harassment in the retail industry to inform policies and practices to better prevent and respond to sexual harassment.
- This research employs mixed methods, including analysis of data from four large surveys, key informant interviews (retailer, employer and union), and focus groups with managers and workers across a range of retail employment contexts.
- The report is also timely given the new legal obligations under the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* (Cth) requiring proactive measures to prevent unlawful conduct related to sexual harassment (positive duty).

### Key findings

#### Sexual harassment in retail is common and normalised.

- Sexual harassment in the retail workplace is experienced by retail workers as routine and unavoidable, influenced by industry norms and narratives such as “the customer is always right”.

#### A range of people perpetrate sexual harassment in the retail industry.

- Retail workers experience sexual harassment from a range of perpetrators including managers, colleagues and customers.

- Experiences of sexual harassment in retail are gendered, with men more likely to be perpetrators and women more likely to be targets.
- The report draws upon four large datasets to show, in the past 5 years:
  - Men were the perpetrators in 86 per cent of sexual harassment cases in retail.
  - 48 per cent of women and 25 per cent of men reported experiencing sexual harassment in retail.
- Customer- or client-perpetrated sexual harassment accounted for 36 per cent of incidents.

<sup>1</sup> Over half (56%) of retail employees are women, making it the third most feminised industry in the country after health care and social assistance, and education and training (ABS, 2022).

## **Sexual harassment in the retail industry can take different forms.**

- The most common form of sexual harassment was sexually suggestive comments and jokes (62%), followed by intrusive questions about private life or physical appearance (45%), and staring or leering (41%).
- Actual or attempted rape or sexual assault and sexually explicit pictures and gifts were reported, but less common (6% and 9%, respectively).
- Most workers who experienced sexual harassment suffered from a variety of unwelcome behaviours (69% of male targets and 79% of female targets) rather than a single form of harassment (31% of male targets and 21% of female targets).

## **Certain groups of retail workers are at higher risk of experiencing sexual harassment.**

- Age and gender were identified as the most prominent risk factors. Young women are a particularly high-risk group.
- Other groups at high risk of experiencing sexual harassment include workers living with disability and gay men.
- Further research is needed to understand the interaction between worker characteristics, job types and industry contexts.

## **The retail industry must improve its policies and practices to prevent and respond to workplace sexual harassment.**

### ***Organisational policy is often inadequate and difficult to apply in practice.***

- Organisational policies and processes lack consistency and many retail workers find it hard to locate, access and understand them.
- Specialist managers (human resources and work health and safety managers) lack the resources they need to address sexual harassment in policy and practice.
- Supervisors and store managers need better resources, training and support as the “frontline” in dealing with sexual harassment.

## ***Training on sexual harassment must be improved.***

- There are significant variations and shortcomings in the frequency, content and types of training provided.
- Suggestions for improvements to training included delivering training face to face and regularly, and explicitly addressing sexual harassment in training materials, including relevant real-world scenarios and bystander intervention strategies.
- Managers also need tailored training relevant to their role.

## **Reporting processes for sexual harassment in the workplace must be improved.**

- Retail managers have varying levels of understanding of complaints processes and what to do in response to sexual harassment.
- Most workers lacked a detailed understanding of their organisation’s complaints processes and the options available for reporting incidents of harassment.
- Workers have concerns about the confidentiality, integrity and effectiveness of reporting processes.
- Workers face challenges when reporting sexual harassment due to a lack of timely action, downplaying or dismissal of reports and ineffective or opaque outcomes.

## **Ad hoc, limited and non-standardised data collection constrains effective industry action on sexual harassment.**

- The lack of robust and standardised data collection on the nature and frequency of workplace sexual harassment in the retail industry challenges effective action and leads to under-reporting.
- Robust data collection and analysis are essential to improved industry-wide investment and action to reduce sexual harassment in retail.

## Key practice and policy recommendations

- Develop industry-wide strategic responses to sexual harassment involving collaboration between retail employers, the major retail union and relevant government agencies.
- Harmonise data collection and increase industry data sharing to build knowledge on the nature and extent of sexual harassment in retail workplaces.
- Develop tailored strategies to address the needs of specific workforce groups, particularly those who are at high risk of experiencing sexual harassment in the retail workplace.
- Deliver regular, high-quality, customised training to workers and managers on sexual harassment in the retail workplace.
- Ensure “safe staffing” practices to build safer workplaces. For example, ensuring sufficient staffing levels during high-risk periods like store closing time.
- Improve access to information, transparency and reporting mechanisms for sexual harassment in the retail workplace.
- Upskill and empower supervisors and managers to respond to sexual harassment in the retail workplace.

## Links to existing ANROWS workplace sexual harassment research

- This research was produced under the 2021–2024 ANROWS Sexual Harassment Research Program (SHRP). The recommendations from this report reinforce findings from the recently published reports under the SHRP.
- Improved reporting mechanisms, improved workplace sexual harassment literacy, scenario-based training, and greater accountability for workplaces, organisations and leaders are also called for in Flynn et al.’s (2024) report [Workplace Technology-Facilitated Sexual Harassment: Perpetration, Responses and Prevention](#).
- The importance of data collection mechanisms to build a picture of the nature, extent and specificity of experience of workplace sexual harassment for key populations of the Australian community is also emphasised in Segrave et al.’s (2023) report [Migrant and Refugee Women in Australia: A Study of Sexual Harassment in the Workplace](#).

STATUS OF PROJECT: **Complete**

[View the project page and download the research](#)

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Research report 1	<i>“Just another day in retail”: Understanding and addressing workplace sexual harassment in the Australian retail industry</i>	Cooper, R., Hill, E., Seetahul, S., Foley, M., Harris, M., Hock, C., & Tapsell, A. (2024). <i>“Just another day in retail”: Understanding and addressing workplace sexual harassment in the Australian retail industry</i> (Research report, 04/2024). ANROWS	7 June 2024

### REFERENCES

Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2022, August 11). *Characteristics spotlight: 2022*. ABS. <https://www.abs.gov.au/articles/characteristics-spotlight-2022>

Flynn, A., Powell, A., & Wheildon, L. (2024). *Workplace technology-facilitated sexual harassment: Perpetration, responses and prevention* (Research report, 03/2024). ANROWS. <https://www.anrows.org.au/publication/workplace-technology-facilitated-sexual-harassment-perpetration-responses-and-prevention/>

Segrave, M., Wickes, R., Keel, C., & Tan, S. J. (2023). *Migrant and refugee women in Australia: A study of sexual harassment in the workplace* (Research report, 06/2023). ANROWS. <https://www.anrows.org.au/publication/migrant-and-refugee-women-in-australia-a-study-of-sexual-harassment-in-the-workplace/>

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