

AHRC National Inquiry into Sexual Harassment in Australian Workplaces 2019

Introduction

Gippsland Women's Health (GWH) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Australian Human Rights Commission's National Inquiry into Sexual Harassment in Australian Workplaces.

Gippsland Women's Health is an independent, regional, not-for-profit service run by women for women based on the social model of health. Working within a feminist framework, we engage with women, communities, service providers and government to improve women's health, wellbeing and freedom of choice by advancing gender equity and working to prevent violence against women. Based in Sale in the geographic centre of Gippsland, Victoria, GWH services all of Gippsland. This includes a catchment area of 41,556 square kilometres, a population of 271,416 and six local government areas.

This submission is informed by the expertise and knowledge of GWH staff, who had the opportunity to participate in a guided discussion or to contribute individually. Gippsland Women's Health is aware that submissions by organisations such as Women's Health Victoria have provided important background and evidence regarding sexual harassment, including its widespread occurrence beyond the workplace, the gendered and intersectional nature of the problem, the gendered drivers of sexual harassment and violence against women, and conceptualisation and perceptions of the issue by the community. Gippsland Women's Health acknowledges and corroborates this background information and evidence, allowing this submission to focus on recommendations.

In addition to this submission, GWH endorses the joint statement, 'Power to Prevent. Urgent Actions Needed to End Sexual Harassment at Work', prepared and submitted by a group of diverse organisations, unions, researchers, peak bodies, health professionals and lawyers who have come together to call for action to stop sexual harassment in the workplace.

Recommendations

1. Dedicate primary prevention to **address the gendered drivers of sexual harassment** as part of a holistic strategy to prevent all forms of violence against women and promote gender equality in line with *Change the Story* (Our Watch).

2. **Undertake primary prevention work beyond the workplace** to encompass all settings, as outlined in the framework in *Change the Story*. Addressing sexual harassment in the workplace in isolation will not work unless the gendered drivers of violence against women are addressed on a societal level.
3. **Provide resources and support for workplaces to implement the *Workplace Equality and Respect Standards*** (Our Watch).
4. Mandate that **all members of parliament and representatives of government** across federal, state and local government **undertake respectful behavior and prevention of violence against women bystander training**.
5. **Ensure all government departments implement the *Workplace Equality and Respect Standards***.
6. **Develop resources and tools to support workplaces to embed policies and procedures that address sexual harassment** and enable employers to hold perpetrators to account while protecting victims. This includes clear and safe pathways for reporting and accountability.
7. **Increase regulatory and enforcement powers** so that there is a stronger incentive for employers to be proactive in preventing sexual harassment. For example, employers should be required to formally report sexual harassment incidents and complaints to an external agency. Incidents should be addressed as a risk to workplace health and safety by both employers and health and safety officials under current laws, with consequences for failing to do so.
8. **Improve legal rights and responses to victims**. Reform anti-discriminatory laws to improve protection for complainants who experience detriment because their employer failed to respond appropriately or timely. Review, amend and extend the Fair Work Act.
9. **Improve coordinated specialist support and resources for victims** to enable them to access and navigate reporting and support options so that they may gain legal advice and services such as counselling from experts in the field.
10. **Build the evidence base with data and research**.
11. **Investigate the impact of rural and remote living on sexual harassment prevalence, experience and support options**.

Conclusion

If not taken seriously or addressed appropriately, sexual harassment may have tragic consequences. We hope that the outcome from this Inquiry will enable us, as a women's health organisation, to more effectively address both violence against women and sexual harassment in the workplace, particularly for people living in remote, rural and regional Gippsland.