November 2025

GENDER EQUALITY
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EVERY WORKPLACE.

Ready, Willing, *Unable* - The Hidden Barriers to Ethical Bystander Action in the workplace

Content warning: This report contains information about sexual harassment. For counselling and support ring Full Stop Australia on 1800 943539 or Mens Line on 1300 78 99 78

This report draws on a survey conducted by Unions NSW between October-November 2025 to examine how workers understand, interpret, and act on incidents of sexual and gender-based harassment. The findings highlight both barriers to and opportunities for ethical bystander action, offering evidence-informed recommendations to support cultural change in workplaces across Australia. The survey provides vital information for government, business and employer groups, unions, legal assistance services, and academics on the scale of workplace sexual harassment and the need for response and prevention initiatives.

Driving Cultural Transformation through Ethical Leadership and Bystander Action

Good leadership sets the terms of possibility for culture. Leaders who act with care, compassion and decency, model the behaviours they wish to see. Bystander training can support this by developing men's capacity to be accountable witnesses rather than heroic rescuers. Every man must be invited to see himself as an agent of safety and respect, standing in solidarity with women and other marginalised communities to challenge harmful norms and drive cultural change. Changing culture means changing language, expectations, and accountability structures. It means recognising that gendered violence is the predictable outcome of broader systems, white supremacy, patriarchy, neoliberalism, and that only collective, intersectional, and gender-transformative action can produce lasting change.

"Until we stop pretending this is just about bad apples, nothing will change."

This statement captures the collective frustration underpinning the call for cultural transformation that Unions NSW and its gender equity training seek to address. Sexual harassment and other forms of gendered violence are not only women's issues, they are men's issues, and therefore demand men's active involvement in change. When men in leadership roles remain silent, they signal consent to the behaviour and sustain harmful norms. To create genuine social transformation, men must learn to challenge other men, model accountability, and engage in difficult dialogues about power and privilege. These conversations must extend beyond workplaces to families, schools, and communities to reshape what it means to be a man in Australian society. As Unions NSW's training demonstrates, gender equity and bystander programs must address the root causes; hegemonic masculinity, cultural silence, and systemic inequity, while offering practical tools for ethical intervention.

Unions NSW acknowledges the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation as the traditional owners of the land on which we live and work. We acknowledge that Soveireignty was never ceded. We pay our respctes to Elders past and present.

Contents

Driving Cultural Transformation through Ethical Leadership and Bystander Action 2

Recommendations 4

Key findings 6

Response Themes 9

Observed Patterns of Sexual Harassment and Bystander Inaction 11

Extent and Incidents of Sexual Harassment and Report Findings 18

Collective Action and Union Involvement 20

Courage and Positive Change 22

Need for Education, Training, and Leadership 24

Practice and Training Implications 25

Broader Systemic Failures 26

Calls for Reform and Accountability 26

Survey Analysis 26

Data 26

Methodology 28

Survey Structure 28

Conclusion 29

Reference List 30

Recommendations

Unions NSW calls on the Government to expand the definition of those who are protected under victimisation clauses in the Respect@Work and Safework laws. This expansion to explicitly include ethical bystanders—those who act when sexual harassment and gender-based discrimination occurs—so ethical bystanders are afforded robust legal protections from victimisation.

Priority Actions for Government to Strengthen Safe, Gender-Equal Workplaces

Government Leadership and Policy Alignment

- Fund programs that reduce gender-based harassment and build ethical bystander skills in male-dominated workplaces.
- Align these initiatives with the national prevention framework and Respect@Work guidelines.
- Ensure consultative policy development, explicitly embedding the role of ethical bystanders.

Training, Capability Building and Workplace Practice

- Introduce mandatory, practical bystander-focused training that includes real scenarios and clear expectations of safe intervention.

Protections, Safety and Accountability

- Strengthen and enforce protections for ethical bystanders to ensure safe workplace intervention.
- Strengthen protections for bystanders and complainants from victimisation or retaliation.

Union Engagement and Workforce Structures

- Leverage union influence for accountability, support union-led training, and share data to improve responses.
- Support stronger union engagement and delegate presence, particularly in small and male-dominated workplaces where power imbalances are greatest.

Key findings

The survey results indicate that sexual and gender-based harassment is both common and persistent across Australian workplaces. Across the total sample of 940 respondents, a clear majority, 484 workers, reported witnessing sexual or gender-based harassment, with more than half observing such behaviour several times per year. Most perpetrators were identified as men (85%), while women were overwhelmingly the primary targets (84%). Additionally, 296 respondents explicitly stated that sexual harassment is a problem in their workplace, underscoring ongoing cultural normalisation and systemic inaction. These findings reveal high exposure to inappropriate conduct, significant barriers to ethical bystander intervention, and substantial gaps in employer prevention, training, and accountability.

Bystander behaviour and barriers to intervention

While many respondents indicated that they would "always speak out" in principle, significantly fewer had done so in practice. The survey revealed a gap between intent and action, driven largely by fear, uncertainty, and lack of trust in employer systems.

Top reported barriers

- Fear of retaliation
- Belief that employer would not take the issue seriously
- Uncertainly about how to respond or what to say
- Fear of damaging work relationships
- Concern about confidentiality or repercussions

" I'm afraid of victimisation by my employer"

"I wish I was older and wiser when I was sexually harassed at work. I feel like I would now be more likely to speak up."

"The individual acted as if they were untouchable and the other leaders were more interested reputational risk before healthy and safe workplace."

"The offender knew the workplace was toothless and wouldn't really do anything as long as they didn't cross the line into physical harassment."

Reported interventions were typically informal, for example, privately supporting the person experiencing the behaviour or discouraging the person using the behaviour. Formal reporting was less common and often viewed as unsatisfactory, or even detrimental to the person reporting.

"It stopped the behaviour but there were no consequences for it."

"It stopped in meetings I attended, but it continued in other areas. Sexist/LGBTIQA jokes when "the boys" were together."

"I was sacked."

Workplace Culture, Misogyny and Bystander Responses

The open-text responses to the *Being an Ethical Bystander* survey reveal strong concerns about workplace culture, particularly around misogyny, power imbalances, and the persistence of sexual and gender-based harassment. Participants described workplaces where sexist comments, subtle undermining, and gender bias are embedded in everyday interactions. For some, these experiences were linked to long-term harm, workplace exclusion, and fear of retaliation when speaking out. Respondents also highlighted alcohol-related misconduct, particularly in historically male-dominated industries, and the normalisation of inappropriate behaviour by senior staff. Several noted that even when formal policies exist, the organisational culture and leadership responses often fail to prevent harm or protect those who report.

The Bystander Effect

A consistent theme was the bystander effect. That is, colleagues witnessing harassment but feeling powerless, unsupported, or unwilling to act (Liebst, Philpot, Bernasco, Dausel, Ejbye-Ernst, Nicolaisen, & Lindegaard, 2019). Some expressed frustration that, *"people just don't take it seriously,"* while others described a broader sense of futility, noting that complaints are ignored, covered up, or used against the complainant. This culture of silence undermines trust and contributes to ongoing psychological distress and unsafe environments.

The following participant quotes illustrate these themes:

"It's gotten worse as it's normalised. My workplace is unsafe for women and girls."

"Misogyny seems to be acceptable behaviour."

"Went from the usual comments of women belonging in the kitchen to just lots of sexism now disguised as ensuring the job is done — 'Are you sure you know how to do that?' 'You need my help don't you?' about the simplest of tasks."

"As a woman, I have been belittled, messed with when in a management role, challenged constantly… It is exhausting, dehumanising and undermines your authority."

"When I started in my industry there was a lot of sexual behaviour — my boss used to try it on when drunk with all of the younger women. Alcohol and sexual inappropriateness has been reduced."

"If the manager or owner is sexually harassing people in a small workplace then there is no one to complain to."

"People just don't take it seriously. Colleagues see it happening and don't intervene or explain it away with comments like 'oh they're just being boys.'"

"It is distressing, depressing and has sent one of my former managers to the brink (attempted suicide)… I feel frustrated and scared about what to do about this."

"I am no longer able to work in the workplace that I loved due the lack of understanding around sexual harassment and how to appropriately deal with it."

"No one cares. So, next time I witness something or if someone confides in me... I'm going to mind my own business. Not my problem."

Response Themes

Normalisation and Cultural Acceptance of Harassment

Quotes like *"It's gotten worse as it's normalised"* and "Misogyny seems to be acceptable behaviour" indicate that gendered harassment is embedded in workplace culture. It shows how harmful behaviour becomes minimised, excused, or reinterpreted as *"just the way things are,"* especially in male-dominated industries.

Gendered Power and Undermining of Women's Authority

"As a woman, I have been belittled, messed with when in a management role..." highlights the gendered power imbalance and how women's professional authority is routinely challenged. It points to a culture where sexism intersects with hierarchy, eroding confidence and reinforcing exclusion.

Structural Barriers to Reporting

Comments such as *"If the manager or owner is sexually harassing people... there is no one to complain to,"* and *"Complaints are ignored, covered up, or used against the complainant"* indicate systemic failures in reporting mechanisms. Workers feel that there are not any safe or independent avenues for redress, which reinforces silence and impunity.

Psychological and Emotional Harm

A number of quotes describe experiences as *"distressing, depressing,"* and even leading to *"attempted suicide"* exposing the mental health consequences of persistent harassment and inaction. These responses move beyond individual discomfort to psychosocial harm, linking clearly with WHS frameworks on psychological safety.

Incremental Change and Contradictions

The example, *"Alcohol and sexual inappropriateness has been reduced"* acknowledges some limited improvements, suggesting partial progress alongside ongoing structural issues. It underscores that change is uneven. Behavioural norms may shift in one area but persist in others.

Disillusionment and Withdrawal

The final quote in the list, *"No one cares… next time I witness something… I'm going to mind my own business."* signals burnout and significant moral disengagement among bystanders and those who experience these behaviours alike. It shows that organisational inaction erodes trust, discouraging future reporting or intervention.

Beyond the bystander effect, these accounts reveal a deeply embedded culture of normalised misogyny, the undermining of women's authority, and structural barriers to reporting. Respondents described profound psychological harm and a sense of futility that discourages intervention. While some noted modest improvements, most expressed disillusionment at the persistence of gendered power dynamics and the failure of workplace systems to ensure safety or accountability. Together, these voices reveal a serious message, sexual harassment is not simply about individual behaviour, it reflects entrenched cultural norms and systemic failings. Preventing harm requires more than

awareness campaigns and legal reform; it demands deep cultural and societal change, leadership accountability, and empowering bystanders to act safely and effectively. The preliminary findings revealed here, suggest that while many workplaces possess formal policies, substantial gaps remain in workplace culture, implementation, training, and accountability. Workers express a willingness to act as ethical bystanders but face systemic barriers that suppress intervention and reporting. Sustainable prevention requires clear bystander training, meaningful consultation, and union involvement in creating psychologically safe workplaces.

Gender, Inclusivity, and Intersectionality

While many focus on women's experiences, some respondents noted male victims and LGBTQIA+ or disabled workers often being ignored.

There were calls for unions to develop inclusive policies and acknowledge diverse experiences of harassment.

"It would be great if the union developed a policy on sexual harassment for staff with disabilities."

Workplace Culture and "Boys' Club" Mentality

Many respondents described entrenched cultures of sexism, denial, and bystander silence.

"Boys' club" attitudes and *"blokey cultures"* were mentioned repeatedly.

Some noted that harassment is often normalised or dismissed as *"jokes,"* especially by senior men.

"The reality is the boys' club where females are belittled and treated differently."

"Old-school toxic masculinity, unwanted hugs, kisses, gropes."

Respondents' accounts of workplace culture reveal entrenched sexism, denial, and bystander silence, often described as *"boys' club"* or *"blokey"* environments where harassment is normalised as humour or dismissed as trivial. Statements such as *"the reality is the boys' club where females are belittled and treated differently"* and "old-school toxic masculinity, unwanted hugs, kisses, gropes" illustrate how gendered power operates through both action and inaction. Drawing on Pease (2025) and Katz (2025) work on masculinity and the destabilisation of manhood, these behaviours reflect the reproduction of hegemonic masculinity, where dominance, aggression, and the marginalisation of femininity are institutionalised. Bystander silence functions as a relational tool, reinforcing male complicity and signalling that sexist behaviour is tolerated. Harassment itself becomes a performative act, asserting masculine authority and maintaining symbolic hierarchies in male-dominated workplaces. Framing harassment as jokes further embeds these power relations within everyday culture, obscuring accountability. These patterns are not merely individual failings but structural phenomena, demonstrating the need for interventions that challenge both workplace culture and the social constructions of masculinity that sustain it.

Observed Patterns of Sexual Harassment and Bystander Inaction

Respondents were asked to identify the behaviours they had witnessed. The most commonly reported types were:

- Verbal comments or jokes, (sexually suggestive or gendered remarks)
- Staring and leering (invasive or prolonged looks)
- Unwanted physical contact (touching, hugging, brushing against)
- E-harassment (inappropriate messages, emails, or images)
- Gendered/sexist exclusion (excluding or undermining staff based on gender)

Everyday Misogyny and Gendered Disrespect

Respondents commonly reported experiences of persistent gendered disrespect and intimidation. Female employees were often ignored, undermined, or treated differently from their male colleagues. Some incidents involved deliberate provocation, where misogynistic images, symbols, or rhetoric including references to figures such as Andrew Tate, were used to provoke anger or strong reactions, contributing to a hostile and divisive workplace environment.

"Ignoring instructions by female staff then being friendly and cooperative with male staff in front of female staff."

"Surrounding female staff in big groups and yelling angrily."

"Goading female staff by praising figures like Andrew Tate."

Sexualised Behaviour and Humiliation

Sexualised jokes, gestures, comments, and unwanted exposure were common. Some respondents described being sexualised through writing, questioned about their private lives, or mocked publicly. These actions blurred professional boundaries and caused humiliation.

"He based a character on me and wrote about sexual situations involving my character."

"Questioning a colleague about their sex life extensively."

"Exposing parts of their bodies to staff."

Aggression, Intimidation and Control

Witnesses described acts of aggression, stalking, and intimidation, including blocking physical movement, slamming doors, and shouting. In some cases, senior staff used their position to control or pressure others.

"Blocking the way the teacher was going up the stairs at school during a break."

"Loud aggressive verbal abuse."

"A senior manager told me he had sex in his office with a co-worker while we were all at work."

Institutional Inaction and Normalisation

In many cases, harassment occurred in plain sight but went unchallenged. Witnesses reported a lack of intervention, dismissive responses, or leadership silence. This inaction reinforced the perception that such behaviour was acceptable or *"just part of the culture."*

"Asking when are you going to sleep with me in front of another manager who did nothing."

"Dismissal."

"Unwanted 'check-ins' on wellbeing; coming to classroom for no reason."

Sexualised and Coded Language

Language was often used to reinforce exclusion and harassment. Participants described sexualised jokes, degrading comments, and *"coded"* language that undermined or humiliated colleagues, often framed as humour or harmless talk.

"Written lists with sexual commentary."

"Disrespectful behaviour towards female teachers, degrading sexual comments."

"Coded male gay."

Boundary Violations and Grooming

Respondents reported inappropriate social contact, grooming behaviour, and blurred boundaries disguised as support or mentorship. These examples often involved abuse of professional trust.

"Grooming of colleague's child for sexual reasons."

"Contacting through Facebook to locate out-of-school activities."

"Unsolicited 'mentoring' and gaslighting of issues."

Retaliation and Silencing

Those who spoke up often experienced retaliation or exclusion, such as being denied opportunities, dismissed, or accused of overreacting. These responses discouraged others from reporting and reinforced a culture of silence.

"He acted like I was ungrateful and overreacting."

"Not offered overtime."

The witnessed behaviours reveal a workplace culture where gendered disrespect, sexualised conduct, and intimidation are frequently normalised or ignored. Inaction from bystanders and leadership allows these patterns to persist.

Have you spoken up or intervened when you witnessed workplace sexual harassment?

Many did not speak up – Fear, Futility, and Retaliation

A strong theme was *inaction due to fear or futility*. Many respondents said they did not intervene because previous complaints had been ignored, dismissed, or had led to retaliation. Some lost their jobs or were victimised for speaking up, reinforcing a culture of silence. Others described formal processes as ineffective or performative, especially where perpetrators were senior or well-connected.

"No – I was sacked."

"No - I have spoken out and have been victimised, ignored and ostracised because of it."

"No, without support from executive it did not help."

"The person accused eventually got a promotion! So why did I even bother reporting it?"

"No. I was the victim and reported it to my principal. Nothing was done."

"No. Because the reality is that it is a 'boys club' so if you do say something you are very quickly exited."

"What if training is delivered by a perp."

This theme reveals deep mistrust in institutional systems and highlights that bystander intervention can carry personal risk when cultures of accountability are weak. It is also difficult for employees to trust institutions when the very trainers responsible for delivering bystander training may themselves be perpetrators of sexual harassment.

Speaking up in the moment – Immediate but Limited Impact

Many respondents said they did speak up in the moment or intervened directly when they witnessed harassment. Often this led to a temporary stop in the behaviour, but few saw lasting change. Intervention was effective for isolated incidents, but not where behaviour was habitual or culturally embedded.

"Yes, in that moment it stopped."

"I spoke up in a public forum, warning the person they were speaking inappropriately. He agreed and it hasn't happened since."

"Yes – the behaviour stopped immediately."

"Sometimes. It often puts a stop to inappropriate behaviour that is happening at that moment, but nothing changes long term."

While these examples show individual courage and ethical action, they also highlight the limits of isolated interventions in environments resistant to change.

Temporary or Partial Change

Several responses described interventions that led to short-term improvement but no sustained change. Those who used the behaviours often adjusted their behaviour to be *"less obvious"* or shifted their targets.

"It stopped temporarily."

"No, it just changed from blatant sexism to 'less obvious' forms."

"It stopped for a while, but the offender continued later."

"As far as I know it stopped."

These responses suggest that harassment behaviours often adapt to avoid detection rather than truly cease, especially where consequences are weak or inconsistent.

Institutional Failure and Systemic Barriers

Many respondents expressed frustration at organisational inaction, lack of HR follow-up, and ineffective complaint mechanisms. A number noted that even when offenders were spoken to, no formal consequences followed. Some reported that management prioritised reputational protection or avoided acting for fear of being seen as discriminatory.

"No, the complaints process in the public service is utterly useless."

"The employer thanked me and has not done a thing."

"Management would not act."

"He was removed temporarily but nothing else happened."

"No, because the management and HR teams were more concerned about being accused of racism than about the harassment itself."

"Manage discipline staff when you speak up, so now most staff are leaving. After 24 yrs I have given up & retiring early".

This indicates that systemic and cultural barriers, rather than lack of awareness, are key obstacles to effective intervention.

Fear, Retaliation, and Job Insecurity

Many noted fear of losing employment, particularly among casual or temporary workers, as a key barrier to reporting. This was especially pronounced in education, hospitality, and remote areas.

"Casual teachers fear not being offered further hours."

"I was worried my contract would not be renewed if I complained too loudly."

"Remote areas are affected differently — job security is hazardous if you talk out."

Willingness to Act

"It's hard, but I couldn't' just stand there. It's about respect for your workmates."

Many participants expressed a clear willingness to intervene when witnessing harassment, demonstrating ethical commitment and solidarity with colleagues. Respondents frequently articulated the importance of "doing something," even if their actions were indirect or delayed. Statements such as *"I did speak out"* and *"Even with all the above, I would still take action"* highlight a shared ethical orientation toward responsibility and care. These reflections reveal that workers view bystander action not simply as compliance but as an ethical stance rooted in fairness , care and empathy. This aligns with feminist ethics of care, where ethical decision-making centres relationships and context rather than rigid rules. Respondents who felt confident in their knowledge of policies or supported by their unions were more likely to take proactive steps, such as offering support to the person experiencing the behaviour, confronting the person using the behaviour, or notifying management.

However, several respondents emphasised that ethical action depends on feeling safe and supported: "I would definitely offer support to them later though, and speak to a supervisor." This demonstrates how ethical bystander behaviour operates within relational and institutional constraints. The findings affirm that fostering a culture of care, solidarity, and clarity around safe intervention pathways is essential for empowering workers to act.

Barriers to Intervention and Power Relations

"You risk your job if you speak up, and management won't back you."

While many workers wish to act, a significant number identified barriers that inhibited them from doing so. Fear of retaliation, employment insecurity, power hierarchies, and uncertainty about what constitutes harassment were the most common deterrents. As one respondent explained, *"Sometimes it is not safe."* Another respondent said, *"It would be dependent on the seniority of the person involved."* These statements demonstrate how power circulates through organisational discourse, producing silence and self-censorship. Workers internalise hierarchical authority and the potential social or professional costs of dissent.

A Feminist analysis reveals how these power relations are gendered: women and gender-diverse workers often weigh additional risks, including being disbelieved, ridiculed, or labelled as troublemakers. Intersectional factors, such as migrant status, disability, or minority identity, further amplify vulnerability. Respondents who experienced or witnessed harassment reported that management responses were inconsistent or punitive, reinforcing a sense of futility: *"I was sacked."* These findings indicate that ethical inaction is not an ethical failure but rather a rational response to very unsafe and inequitable workplace conditions. This culture makes it unsafe to speak up, as workers learn that raising concerns often results in punishment rather than protection. In other words, the workplace culture itself becomes unsafe. Workers understand that challenging harassment or inequality can lead to retaliation or exclusion, making silence a form of self-preservation. Effective change therefor depends not only on organisational policies but on transforming the underlying culture and societal norms that perpetuate gendered power imbalances, through ongoing gender equity training, leadership accountability, protective mechanisms, union engagement, and broader social reform.

"If the boss does it, no one says anything."

Bystander Behaviour, Male Accountability, and Cultural Drivers of Harassment

The comment above reveals how institutional discourse legitimises disrespect and discourages accountability. Participants described environments where sexism and discrimination were normalised through humour, traditions, and tolerance of misconduct by senior staff. *"People just don't take it seriously"* was a recurring sentiment, expressing frustration and resignation. These environments reproduce hegemonic masculinities, particularly in male-dominated sectors where aggression and dominance are culturally legitimised. It is important to note that sexual harassment and gendered violence are not women's issues, they are men's issues, because they are overwhelmingly perpetrated by men and perpetuated through men's silence and complicity.

When men in leadership positions witness harassment and fail to act, they implicitly endorse the behaviour. This silence reproduces *networks of complicity*, where friendships, mentorships, and professional loyalties normalise inaction (Cunningham, Drumwright, & Foster, 2019). Interventions must therefore target peer culture and male leadership accountability. Men must learn to challenge other men collectively and individually, and to develop the skills to dismantle patriarchal systems intersecting with colonial, capitalist, and heterosexist structures. The precarious economy compounds these power imbalances, casual work, insecure hours, and stacked hierarchies create spaces where disrespect becomes routine and vulnerable workers cannot speak up. Addressing these issues requires therefor not only workplace reform but a broader cultural shift in how masculinity and power are understood and enacted across Australian society.

Rewriting Workplace Culture: Challenging Masculine Norms and Silence

"People just shrug it off. The message is: don't make a fuss."

"I spoke up and was told to 'lighten up.'"

"Men protect each other—it's like an unspoken rule."

Power defines what is considered *"normal"* within workplace and social culture. The accounts above exemplify how masculine solidarity functions as a network of complicity, sustaining the cultural rule that silence equals professionalism. Discourses of *"toughness", "banter"*, and *"endurance"* shape behaviour long before anyone consciously chooses to act. Gender is performed daily, staff enact masculinity and femininity through language, jokes, and hierarchies. When low-paid or young staff are expected to tolerate sexist or homophobic speech as *"part of the job,"* that reflects a cultural, not individual, failing. As one respondent described, *"Misogyny seems to be acceptable behaviour."* These comments highlight how institutions reward silence and frame resistance as deviance.

If we are to change these patterns, we must reframe sexual harassment and gendered violence as fundamentally linked to how masculinity and power are produced. This means addressing how neoliberal, paternalistic, and technocratic forces shape competition, dominance, and exclusion. Men's complicity in these systems must be acknowledged, not to individualise blame, but to locate responsibility where it belongs: within the social and institutional arrangements that advantage men as a group. A culture shift also requires new narratives about men who share power, care, and empathy. Ethical bystander programs must therefore go beyond awareness, providing men with tangible tools to intervene, unlearn harmful norms, and rewrite the language of power in everyday interactions.

Intersectional Dimensions of Bystander Action

"I didn't want to say anything because I'm on a visa."

"As a gay man, I'm used to comments—but it doesn't mean they're okay."

"People think women of colour are 'tough' so they don't see it as harassment."

An intersectional analysis reveals that bystander experiences are shaped by the overlapping effects of gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and disability. The powerful quotes above reflect power, marginalisation, and invisibility in bystander behaviour. LGBTQIA+ workers and those from culturally diverse or migrant backgrounds often described heightened vulnerability, both to harassment and to potential backlash when intervening. *"Much of the sexual harassment we experience is related to religious and cultural attitudes which can be difficult to confront,"* one participant explained. Others emphasised how employment insecurity, casualisation, and disability created barriers to speaking out.

These findings highlight that ethical bystander frameworks cannot assume uniform risk or privilege. Feminist and intersectional approaches argue for situated ethics, acknowledging that power and safety are context-dependent. Workers on temporary visas or casual contracts may prioritise self-preservation, while others may act collectively through unions or peer networks. Effective training and policy must therefore address how social location shapes agency and risk, embedding strategies that empower marginalised workers without placing additional burdens on them to correct systemic inequities.

Extent and Incidents of Sexual Harassment and Report Findings

Sexual harassment remains a pervasive and deeply entrenched issue in Australian workplaces. Approximately one in five Australians (19%) report having experienced sexual harassment in the workplace. According to the Australian Human Rights Commission's (AHRC) 2022 National Survey, one in three workers (33%) reported experiencing workplace sexual harassment within the past five years (41% of women and 26% of men). Among those who experienced workplace sexual harassment within the past five years, 91% of women and 55% of men reported being harassed by men (AHRC, 2022). The majority of perpetrators of workplace sexual harassment are men, with 77% of all reported targets indicating that the harasser was male (AHRC, 2022). Women consistently report experiencing every form of sexual harassment behaviour at significantly higher rates than men, underscoring the persistent gendered nature of workplace harassment. According to the Australian Human Rights Commission's *Respect@Work* national survey (2022), over the past five years, certain groups of Australians have continued to experience workplace sexual harassment at disproportionately higher rates than the general population. Younger workers were particularly affected, with 47% of those aged 15–17, 46% of those aged 18–29, and 39% of those aged 30–39 reporting experiences of workplace sexual harassment.

Workplace sexual harassment was also reported at disproportionately high rates among several groups. Nearly half (46%) of respondents who identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, queer, asexual, undecided, not sure, questioning, or another sexual identity reported experiencing harassment. Rates were even higher among people with an intersex variation (70%), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (56%), and people with disability (48%) (AHRC, 2022). Recent data also indicates that gender equality remains a significant factor influencing employment decisions, particularly among women. Approximately 75% of female respondents, compared with 44% of male respondents, reported that an organisation's commitment to gender equality would be an important consideration when seeking new employment (Our Watch, 2024). These harms are underpinned by structural inequalities, with gender discrimination, power imbalance, and normalised disrespect identified as key drivers (Our Watch, 2024). The social and economic impacts are profound, costing the Australian economy over $3.8 billion annually while undermining equality, productivity, and wellbeing (Our Watch, 2025).

Sexual harassment, sex-based and gender-based harassment are forms of gendered violence that occur when disrespect, entitlement, and abuse of power are normalised in workplace cultures (Safe Work NSW, 2024). Sexual harassment includes any unwelcome sexual advance, unwelcome request for sexual favours, or other unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature in circumstances in which a reasonable person, having regard to all the circumstances, would have anticipated the possibility that the person harassed would be offended, humiliated or intimidated (Safe Work NSW, 2024). Under the Sex Discrimination Act 1984 (Cth), employers now have a positive duty to take reasonable and proportionate measures to eliminate such behaviours, alongside their obligations under work health and safety legislation. Within this framework, ethical bystander action has emerged as a central strategy for prevention. Ethical bystanders recognise harmful, disrespectful, or discriminatory conduct and choose to act, whether through safe intervention, challenging the behaviour, or supporting those affected (VicHealth, 2024). This approach shifts responsibility from individual experiencing the behaviour toward collective cultural change. Ethical bystander approaches also align with the concept of psychosocial safety, which refers to the conditions that protect workers from psychological harm arising from poor workplace culture, aggression, or harassment (VicHealth,

2024). When organisations build environments where workers can intervene safely and confidently, they strengthen psychosocial safety and promote respect.

The findings indicated that sexual and gender-based harassment remains a widespread and serious issue within Australian workplaces. A substantial majority of respondents reported witnessing harassment at some point, within the past month, year, or longer ago, suggesting persistent exposure to inappropriate conduct across diverse workplaces.

Amongst other findings, the survey highlighted:

- Across the dataset, a clear majority of participants, 484 respondents, reported having witnessed sexual or gender-based harassment in their workplace. Over 50% had witnessed sexual harassment several times per year.
- The overwhelming pattern reported was that most perpetrators were identified as men (85%), and most targets were women (84%), while men accounted for 29% of those who reported being targeted.
- In addition, 296 respondents explicitly stated that sexual harassment is a problem in their workplace, a figure that underscores the persistence and normalisation of harmful behaviours across multiple industries.

Many respondents described:

- Repeated exposure, *"several times per year," "weekly or more,"* or *"within the past month."*
- High prevalence of observed harassment.
- Common behavioural patterns, included verbal and non-verbal misconduct.
- Significant barriers to ethical bystander intervention.
- Inconsistent employer responses and limited gender equity and bystander training.
- Positive influence of union support and delegate presence on worker confidence and reporting outcomes.

The survey results reveal a clear gendered divide in how sexual harassment is perceived, recognised and understood in the workplace. Among women respondents, 180 believe sexual harassment is a problem in their workplace, compared to 96 men. So, almost twice as many women as men believe sexual harassment is a problem in their workplace. This pattern suggests that women may be more likely to recognise harassment and perceive it to be a problem.

Collective Action and Union Involvement

Some respondents described attempts to speak up collectively, often through union channels or group advocacy. While these efforts sometimes stopped individual incidents, they often led to backlash, labelling of complainants as "troublemakers," or even retaliation.

"Myself and three other union reps were targeted as troublemakers. They tried to buy us off."

"It was an ongoing issue in a non-union workplace, where the boss was vocally anti-union."

These experiences show that even collective responses can be undermined in workplaces where leadership resists scrutiny or accountability.

Role of Unions and Delegates

Respondents consistently emphasised that union presence improves both reporting outcomes and worker confidence. Where active delegates or union support structures existed, participants reported greater trust, accountability, and follow-up after incidents.

"The delegates we have at our workplace are extremely supportive of victims of sexual harassment. They have zero tolerance for that kind of behaviour."

This statement exemplifies how proactive union delegates contribute to a supportive environment, reinforcing trust and accountability in responding to harassment. However, participants in small or non-unionised workplaces often reported weak accountability and managerial perpetrators facing no consequences.

"Unions often support the perpetrators at my workplace so the union needs to stop doing that otherwise you are supporting sexual harassment."

"This behaviour is present in unions. People, like anyone else, must be made aware that they should consider there may be a perspective in comments or remarks that they themselves won't see at first."

However, quotes such as the ones above reveals that, sexual harassment can occur in any workplace. Unions can sometimes also protect perpetrators rather than victims, which can undermine trust, accountability, and efforts to address sexual harassment in the workplace.

Unions and Speaking Up Against Sexual Harassment

Role of Unions in Advocacy and Support

Many respondents believe unions can play a crucial role in empowering workers to report and resist sexual harassment.

Union delegates are described as strong allies and effective advocates when they visibly support victims.

The presence of a delegate as a support person can help individuals feel safer when reporting harassment.

Calls were made for visible campaigns, regular messaging, and training for members and officials to reinforce unions' stance.

"It will greatly assist the person with a Union delegate present as a support person."

"Visible campaigns and regular messaging… if the union could offer real support, this would be comforting."

Distrust and Disillusionment with Unions

Several participants also expressed loss of trust in their unions, citing experiences of inaction, bias, or even protection of perpetrators. Some believe unions have become bureaucratic or politically compromised. Others mentioned being dismissed, silenced, or re-traumatised by union representatives.

"The union protected the male perpetrator, not the female victims."

"My union told me to calm down and call back later."

"Unions often support the perpetrators at my workplace."

Power Imbalances and Political Context

Respondents highlighted power asymmetries, especially in politics and education, where staff fear retaliation.

There were strong calls for unions to challenge institutional power and cultural silence surrounding harassment.

"It must apply to political staffers, there is too much power for politicians to slander staff under privilege."

"Police your own members first! They can be the worst offenders."

Courage and Positive Change

Despite the risks, a smaller number of participants described moments of successful intervention where speaking up made a real difference, either stopping the behaviour or empowering others.

"Yes, the colleague was spoken to by the manager."

"He was removed from the workplace."

"Students were subsequently addressed, and the victim felt more empowered going forward."

"Yes – the person was told not to come back to work."

"I supported and backed the male asking the other male to stop."

These examples demonstrate that clear, visible action and leadership support can make intervention both safe and effective.

Responses reveal a pattern of hesitation, frustration, and resilience. While many witnesses wanted to intervene, they were discouraged by hostile cultures, lack of support, or fear of retaliation. Those who did speak up often saw only short-term results or institutional inaction. Across the dataset, participants emphasised that true change requires more than individual courage.

Who Have You Witnessed Perpetrating Sexual Harassment in the Workplace?

Range across Roles and Settings

Respondents identified a wide range of individuals as using gender based violence in the workplace, highlighting that sexual harassment is not limited to one profession, age group, or setting. Reports included incidents involving students, senior staff, colleagues, clients, and community members, demonstrating how harassment can occur across power hierarchies and institutional contexts. Respondents most often identified male colleagues or male managers as offenders, followed by customers, clients, patients, or students in certain sectors such as education, health, and community services.

"Member of Parliament."

"Founder/director of firm."

"Boss."

"Doctors."

"Husband of manager."

These examples show that those who use these behaviours can occupy positions of authority, leadership, or public trust. In some cases, their status appeared to shield them from accountability or scrutiny.

Policies and Employer Responses

A majority of respondents indicated their workplaces had a sexual harassment policy, but fewer believed staff were meaningfully consulted in its development or that policies explicitly addressed ethical bystander roles.

Where training was available, many respondents rated it as ineffective or tokenistic, describing it as *"box-ticking"* or overly generic online modules.

"It was just a box ticking exercise, not meaningful at all."

When asked, *"How would you rate your employer's approach to preventing sexual harassment?"*, responses revealed mixed but largely critical views of workplace prevention efforts.

Only 14% (n=115) rated their employer's approach as very effective, and 26% (n=115) as somewhat effective.

However, nearly one in three respondents (31%, n=235) said their employer's approach was not effective, while 26% (n=197) were unsure, indicating widespread uncertainty or lack of confidence in employer-led prevention.

"If middle and senior management were made accountable… the improper behaviours would cease."

"Management isn't interested in the truth; they are only interested in their bias agendas."

This suggests that despite the existence of policies, many workers do not see these as translating into effective prevention or cultural change.

Need for Education, Training, and Leadership

Respondents repeatedly called for mandatory, practical training for all staff and leaders.

"Training must be mandatory to ensure positive duty is recognised."

"It starts from management down, leading by example."

Training

Respondents called for mandatory, practical training that includes realistic examples, leadership participation, and clear organisational accountability.

Many respondents reported *"no training"* or rated available training as 'not effective' or 'somewhat effective'.

When asked why did you rate this ineffective, respondents highlighted that training was often tokenistic, poorly developed, rushed , or never occured.

"Because it is token. Because complaints were mobbed at the training and told to toe the line at the line drawn in the sand!"

"It was very formulaic and systemic within the department of education. A couple of videos and a quiz."

"It was rushed training as usual, so there is so much one does not understand."

"Everybody completes it in line in a rush, as its mandatory. Then no-one looks at it again or even remembers what was said."

"It's usually a memo or Tool Box memo which staff are supposed to read and sign. They just tick the box and pretend they assimilated it."

"All talk, no action."

"It was death by PowerPoint and clearly outlined everything my employer failed to do to protect me or correct the behaviour or even support me."

"There's training, but it doesn't deal with gendered power or real scenarios."

"Never occured."

"Because it doesn't acknowledge gender equity and the reality of it, and the fact that most perpetrators are male, and victims are female, the "respect at work" course is a very general respect training, which, if is a result of needing sexual harassment training mandated, is a very poor effort, where even facilitators say " this course is gender neutral" because it shouldn't matter and it doesn't" which is a very false , misinformed statement from a facilitator, and there is no way we can drive any change, with no acknowledging the real problem, at current, they only hide documents on an intranet, and bandaid fix rather then finding real solutions."

Some reflections also reveal that the existing training lacks a focus on gendered power dynamics. The training may cover basic concepts like discrimination or harassment rules, but it does not address how power operates differently for men, women, gender diverse and non-binary people in the workplace. For example, it might not explore how men in leadership can influence culture or how systemic biases affect decision-making, promotions, or who gets listened to. Further, it might not show how subtle micro-aggressions, sexist jokes, or unequal task assignments play out day-to-day. This makes it more difficult for participants to recognise, respond to, or prevent harassment or inequity in their own workplaces. Without addressing power and real-life situations, participants might understand the concept but not know how to identify or act in practice. It may leave employees feeling the training is "tick-the-box" rather than genuinely transformative. The above quote exemplifies a theme that appears across many responses, highlighting the perceived gaps in current training, pointing to training programs that teach rules but fail to teach people how to navigate or change the actual power structures and everyday dynamics that lead to inequality.

Practice and Training Implications

- Embed feminist and intersectional frameworks in training and policy. Move beyond legal compliance toward understanding power, privilege, and gendered norms.
- Provide practical, scenario-based bystander training. Equip workers with context-sensitive strategies for safe intervention, balancing care, consent, and accountability.
- Protect and recognise ethical bystanders. Establish clear anti-victimisation provisions and confidential reporting options.
- Ensure meaningful worker consultation. Co-design policies with diverse employees and unions to ensure legitimacy and inclusion.
- Strengthen leadership responsibility. Require managers to model ethical behaviour and actively address misconduct.
- Promote union engagement. Support delegate-led peer education and collective responses that reinforce solidarity.
- Address masculinity and power. Implement gender equity programs and training that help leaders and teams understand and challenge harmful masculinities.
- Invest in ongoing education. Embed gender equity and bystander training across career stages, measure outcomes, and adapt approaches based on worker feedback.

Broader Systemic Failures

Respondents linked harassment to broader cultural and structural problems, from weak policies and poor enforcement to lack of consequences for offenders. Some suggested unions and employers alike must move from reactive to preventative approaches.

"We treat symptoms, not causes."

"Healthy employees can call out behaviour respectfully."

"Any harassment that goes unchallenged will fester and spread like cancer."

Calls for Reform and Accountability

Participants urged unions to review their own cultures, ensure zero tolerance within their ranks, and improve transparency in handling complaints. Many expressed hope that unions would *"step up"* and lead real change.

"You need to train some union organisers about their sexist behaviour before we are confident to contact them."

"Unions must act accordingly."

"Glad the delegates and organisers have zero tolerance."

Survey Analysis

The data were analysed descriptively and thematically to identify key themes and patterns across recognition, intervention, organisational support, and barriers to bystander action. Qualitative comments were reviewed thematically to highlight recurring concerns and illustrative quotes that reflect workers' lived experiences and attitudes, guided by feminist and intersectional frameworks. These perspectives recognise that harassment is sustained through structural inequalities, organisational discourse, and intersecting power relations. Thematic analysis identified patterns of recognition, intervention, and barriers, while qualitative responses were examined for how workers construct their identities, responsibilities, and ethical positions within systems of power. Together, these provide a nuanced understanding of how gender, hierarchy, and culture shape ethical bystander behaviour in Australian workplaces.

Data

Responses and Industries

A total of 940 responses were included in the dataset, encompassing both complete and partial submissions. Partial responses were retained to capture the full scope of qualitative insights and ensure inclusivity of incomplete yet valuable feedback. Respondents represented a broad cross-section of industries, with highest participation from education, transport, community and disability services, health, and public/emergency services. Demographic data captured gender, industry, and employment role, enabling intersectional analysis of bystander patterns and workplace context.

Gender Diversity among Survey Participants

Understanding the gender distribution of respondents is important, as gender shapes both the likelihood of witnessing harassment and the perceived safety of intervening. A total of 727 respondents provided gender information in the survey. Just over half identified as women (53%, n=391), while 42% identified as men (n=305). A smaller proportion of participants (n=9) identified as intersex, non-binary, or their own gender, and 3% (n=22) selected 'prefer not to say'. Unions NSW acknowledges that restricting gender options to woman, man, non-binary/other, and prefer not to say does not fully reflect the distinction between sex and gender and may obscure important insights regarding transgender, intersex and gender-diverse workers, who often face heightened risks of workplace discrimination and harassment. Consequently, the terms woman and female are used interchangeably throughout the report, as are man and male; this is a methodological necessity arising from the survey design rather than a reflection of how gender should be understood in practice. Given the small number of gender-diverse respondents, findings for these groups should be interpreted cautiously; however, their inclusion remains essential to ensuring union advocacy reflects the experiences of all workers. Unions NSW is committed to improving future data collection by adopting more inclusive and precise gender measures that better acknowledge the diversity within our membership.

Languages other than English and country of birth

It is important to note that respondents were not asked about other factors related to cultural and linguistic diversity, such as religion or visa status, which limits the ability to draw conclusions about Australia's immigrant and refugee populations. Therefore, these results should be interpreted with caution. Additional barriers may have affected survey participation among these groups. For example, individuals with insecure immigration status or temporary work contracts may be less likely to take part in workplace surveys. This includes non-English speakers, low-socioeconomic migrants, international students, and holders of humanitarian refugee visas. Furthermore, limited awareness of workplace rights and obligations regarding sexual harassment, cultural differences in perceptions of harassment, and potential difficulties understanding survey questions could have further influenced responses from participants whose first language is not English.

Those who experienced the behaviour

The majority of those who experienced the behaviour were women, although some incidents involving men and non-binary workers were also described. Several respondents raised concerns about student behaviours in education settings, and the lack of institutional response.

Methodology

The Being an Ethical Bystander Survey was developed and administered by Unions NSW to understand workers' experiences, attitudes, and practices relating to bystander behaviour in response to workplace sexual harassment. Distributed online through union networks, workplaces, and promoted on social media, including Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram and TikTok, the survey collected responses from workers across a broad range of industries, including education, transport, community and disability services, health, and emergency services. The survey comprised 27 items combining multiple-choice, Likert scale, and open-ended questions to capture both quantitative trends and qualitative insights.

Survey Structure

The survey was structured around several key thematic areas:

Bystander experience

- Whether respondents had witnessed sexual or gender-based harassment in their workplace.
- Frequency and context of witnessing such incidents.
- Identification of the person who experienced the harassment (e.g., gender, role, or employment status).
- Identification of the person who used the behaviour (e.g., colleague, supervisor, customer, or manager).
- The types of behaviours witnessed, including verbal, physical, or online misconduct.

Bystander knowledge, confidence, and barriers

- Whether respondents had spoken up or intervened when witnessing harassment.
- Factors that prevented intervention, such as fear of retaliation, uncertainty, or lack of organisational support.
- Level of comfort in speaking up or offering support.
- Perceptions of whether unions can play an important role in supporting ethical bystander behaviour.

Employer behaviour and organisational culture

- Existence and quality of sexual harassment policies.
- Whether staff were meaningfully consulted in the development of these policies.
- Whether policies included guidance on the role of ethical bystanders.
- Access to and quality of gender equity and bystander training on responding to harassment.

- Ratings of the employer's approach to prevention and response.

Open-ended reflections

Respondents were further invited to share additional insights into their personal experiences, observations of workplace culture, and recommendations for improvement.

Conclusion

The findings of this survey make clear that sexual and gender-based harassment remains pervasive across Australian workplaces, sustained by entrenched cultural norms, gendered power imbalances, and inconsistent organisational responses. While workers express strong ethical commitments and willingness to act, fear of retaliation, job insecurity, and limited trust in employer systems continue to suppress bystander intervention. The data also highlight the significant role of unions, leadership accountability, and meaningful, gender-informed training in creating environments where workers feel safe and supported to challenge harmful behaviour. Addressing these issues requires coordinated legislative action, strengthened protections for ethical bystanders, and sustained investment in prevention strategies that address the underlying cultural and structural drivers of harassment. The evidence is clear: lasting change depends on embedding gender equity, psychosocial safety, and collective responsibility at every level of workplace culture, practice and governance.

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