

Applying a gender lens to   
workplace policies and practice

This document assists people and culture / human resources teams tasked with developing and reviewing workplace policies and practices to bring a gender lens to their work.

# What is a gender lens?

Applying a gender lens to a policy involves investigating to what extent the policy is inclusive of people of different genders and considering how the policy might impact different people differently. Workplace systems – including policies, plans, programs, services and communications – can affect people of different genders differently. Applying a gender lens helps us check whether workplace systems are likely to lead to discriminatory effects and inequity in access or inadvertently reinforce harmful gender stereotypes.

This review process should also take an intersectional approach by looking at ways in which different groups of people might be discriminated against based on other identities and social statuses, such as the culture they are from, whether they have children, sexuality, etc.

# Why apply a gender lens?

Applying a gender lens enables workplace managers and policymakers to understand and address the inequalities that may arise from a policy due to people’s different roles and the unequal power relationships between them. Applying a gender lens in the workplace helps to create gender equality by ensuring that:

* any differences in the way processes, policies or structures are likely to impact unfairly on people of different genders are anticipated
* decisions are made that take account of and are responsive to gender and inequalities.[[1]](#footnote-2)

# How to use a gender lens to review workplace policies

In conducting a review of your existing workplace policies, some questions should routinely be asked to make sure practices do not perpetuate gender stereotyping, gender-based discrimination and inequality.

These questions might include:

* How can we ensure that the realities of people’s experiences at work inform the development /review of this policy or procedure?

For example, unconscious bias is difficult to recognise. Paying attention to ensuring you are not favouring those who look ‘like you’ in terms of age, gender, or race is the first step to overcoming unconscious bias. To mitigate against unconscious bias, establish an internal gender equality advisory committee that includes people from different genders, ages, races/ethnicities, or, if expertise is not available internally, contract an external gender equality consultant to assist in the review process.

* To what extent is power shared equally between people of different genders in the workplace? How will this policy or procedure impact the way power is distributed?

For example, when reviewing a policy on sexual harassment, an examination of reporting and complaint procedures may reveal that because more men are in leadership roles, people of other genders may be required to report to a male human resources manager or line manager. This could be one reason for low reporting, as some people may not be comfortable reporting complaints to male line managers. Consider ways to provide more options to make it less likely that gender bias will affect the handling of complaints.

* How might the policy or procedure inadvertently perpetuate or actively work to overcome existing stereotypes and gender inequities?

For example, many organisations offer leave for childcare responsibilities. Sometimes, these are framed as primary and secondary carers with different leave entitlements. Given that childcare continues to be seen as a woman’s role, such framing perpetuates gender stereotypes. Instead, promote flexible work arrangements for all staff, providing opportunities for staff, including men, to take up flexible work options.

* To what extent are there measures in place to address gender inequalities and to ensure staff have equal opportunities and are equally valued and respected?

For example, is diversity considered in the make-up of recruitment panels? Is gender balance considered when the organisation is represented publicly (at speaking engagements, etc.)

* The questions you ask might be different for different policies.

For example, consider how the policy impacts different staff groups and a range of ages, career stages, genders, abilities, sexual preferences and cultural backgrounds. Do you have staff who may not be primary carers but still have significant care responsibilities – if yes, how will a policy or procedure impact those who are not represented? How can this be considered and accounted for during the development phase?

You may also need to source other guidance or research to consider these questions properly and ensure your policy development/review is evidence-based. For example, suppose you are reviewing a sexual harassment policy. In that case, you should refer to relevant research material or consult a specialist organisation (like Our Watch) to ensure the changes result in gender-equitable outcomes. The Australian Human Rights Commission has several research reports and guidance documents to help workplaces understand their legal obligations and implement good practice.[[2]](#footnote-3)

It is impossible to prescribe all the questions your business should ask to appreciate the gender implications of a policy fully. Still, informed and reflective approaches are more likely to result in equitable outcomes.

# Communication of policies and procedures

To be effective, workplaces should regularly communicate policies and procedures to all staff groups across the organisation as part of a comprehensive communications plan.

Managers responsible for implementing policies should undertake training or management briefings to ensure their management practice complies with the policies and procedures’ broad purpose and provisions. In addition, all staff should be provided with training on relevant policies when updated and as part of the induction process.

You will encounter resistance to policy changes involving the promotion of gender equality. It is essential to expect this and to:

* take a proactive approach and maintain ongoing communication
* customise messages for particular audiences
* repeat critical messages in multiple formats (posters, email, staff meetings, intranet, lunchtime learning, etc.)
* create opportunities for two-way communication
* prepare for inevitable questions and respond to all questions promptly and honestly
* highlight what staff need to do/change and explain what’s in it for them.

# Monitoring and evaluating policies and procedures

Ongoing monitoring and review are essential to the policy review process to ensure continuous improvement.

This may include creating and maintaining a safe space for honest feedback from staff about gender equality in the workplace to understand better how people of all genders might perceive and experience policies, actions and approaches.

It is also considered best practice for workplaces to have a clear policy review cycle, which takes place every one to three years, depending on the context. Vary the frequency and scope of your reviews as circumstances, needs and experience dictate.

# Further information and support

**For more information, tools, and resources** on how to prevent sexual harassment in your workplace, visit [Our Watch – Workplace Equality and Respect](https://workplace.ourwatch.org.au) <workplace.ourwatch.org.au>

**For more information and frameworks on addressing sexual harassment as a workplace risk**, visit [Our Watch – Practice guidance: Reducing risk in workplace initiatives to prevent violence against women](https://workplace.ourwatch.org.au/resource/practice-guidance-reducing-risk-in-workplace-initiatives-to-prevent-violence-against-women) <workplace.ourwatch.org.au/resource/practice-guidance-reducing-risk-in-workplace-initiatives-to-prevent-violence-against-women>

**For support**, contact **Our Watch’s Workplace Team** at [equalityandrespect@ourwatch.org.au](mailto:equalityandrespect@ourwatch.org.au)

# Acknowledgements

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 Australian Government

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1. VicHealth (2016). [Applying a gender lens in the workplace [PDF download]](https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/Applying-a-gender-lens-in-the-workplace.pdf). Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, Melbourne. www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/Applying-a-gender-lens-in-the-workplace.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Australian Human Rights Commission. (2017). [Sexual harassment – Information for employers](https://www.humanrights.gov.au/sexual-harassment-information-employers). www.humanrights.gov.au/sexual-harassment-information-employers [↑](#footnote-ref-3)