

Assessing workplace risks of sexual harassment prevention initiatives

Prevention work can have unintended consequences. Such work often includes open discussions about the nature, prevalence and impacts of violence against women, including sexual harassment. Violence against women and their children is a daily reality and a lived experience for many, so talking about violence will have an impact on many of the people we work with. Safety must be considered, and risks should be identified early to ensure prevention initiatives do not unintentionally cause harm.

This brief guidance provides information for those designing and implementing workplace prevention initiatives. Please note that these factsheets are for general information only and do not constitute legal advice, or material that is tailored specifically for your organisation or circumstances.

# Risks commonly associated with prevention initiatives in workplaces

## Disclosure

Any activity on preventing sexual harassment and violence should have a clear process for how to respond to disclosures, including up-to-date referral information for specialised services.

Disclosure means that someone reveals they have directly experienced or perpetrated violence. This may be anyone (an adult or a child) with whom your prevention strategy works, either directly or indirectly.

Staff should anticipate disclosures and be prepared to respond appropriately and safely. Please refer to Our Watch’s [*Practice guidance: Responding to disclosures*](https://workplace.ourwatch.org.au/resource/practice-guidance-responding-to-disclosures) for guidance on what to say and do if someone discloses their experience or perpetration of violence. Building or strengthening partnerships with local specialised services and organisations that respond to violence against women – and ensuring that it’s common knowledge that you do this – sends a clear message about how seriously you take the issue and that appropriate support is available if needed.

## Working with young people

In some settings, for example, sectors like retail and hospitality, there is a disclosure duty to report disclosures made by young people. You should check with relevant regulatory or statutory requirements for your sector. These will vary across Australian states and territories. Knowing your legal and ethical obligations is important, particularly concerning young people.

Ensure all leaders are aware of these legal requirements before initiating prevention activities. Send an information note advising guardians about your prevention activities.

Always ensure that young people understand that if they find any of the activities distressing, they can leave at any time and always have referral information available (Kids Helpline).

## Triggering content

With such a high prevalence of violence against women in Australia, it’s important to consider the triggering nature of prevention activities. Triggering occurs when a conversation, comment or image causes a negative emotional response in someone exposed to it. The emotional response can be fear, sadness, panic, flashbacks, or pain, as well as physical symptoms associated with these emotions.

Triggering can vary in severity, and the most harmful triggering tends to occur when the trigger has been encountered without any prior warning. Prevention activities should include trigger warnings at the start of presentations or training, and the group should be made aware of local support services in case the session raises issues or is triggering for any participants.

## Disrespectful conversations

Prevention work can often involve discussions on topics that make people feel uncomfortable, and this discomfort may be expressed in inappropriate behaviour, such as yelling at other people in the group, being excessively argumentative, making inappropriate jokes, or intimidating behaviour. These topics can include violence against women itself or topics related to gender stereotypes, roles and identity. If not dealt with appropriately, this behaviour can be traumatic for others. Establishing group rules at the start of any prevention activity is an important step to mitigate this risk.

## Exclusionary messages

Sessions can tend to have a focus on male–female relationships. Make sure you consider LGBTIQA+ people. Explore using content that recognises sexual diversity and seek advice from content experts.

# How do we minimise risk in our prevention initiatives?

## Step 1: Identify

Identify any potential risks of your initiatives. Several starting points will be common to all violence prevention initiatives. These include dealing with disclosures and the triggering nature of content for those who have experienced violence. Risks will also be unique to the activity or population group you are working with.

## Step 2: Assess

Assess the likelihood of the identified risks occurring and the level of harm this may cause to individuals and the community. Assess whether each risk can be eliminated or reduced.

## Step 3: Plan and manage

Document all possible risks and strategies to mitigate them. If a risk cannot be eliminated, decide what processes or actions can be implemented to reduce the risk. This may include preliminary training and information for key people, working with additional community partners or stakeholders, consulting with experts in identified areas, or changing the planned implementation of the project.

## Step 4: Monitor and review

Safety plans must be monitored and reviewed to ensure they are effective and relevant. This includes identifying any additional safety concerns that become apparent and monitoring whether the safety plans are working. Not all risks will be identified early in the initiative, and the monitoring and review process allows unanticipated safety concerns to be addressed.

# Further information

**Our Watch** has a range of resources on implementing Workplace Equality and Respect that you can access at [Our Watch – Workplace Equality and Respect](https://workplace.ourwatch.org.au) <workplace.ourwatch.org.au>, or contact Our Watch at [equalityandrespect@ourwatch.org.au](mailto:equalityandrespect@ourwatch.org.au)

# Acknowledgements

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 Australian Government

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