

Engaging leadership teams to champion workplace equality and respect

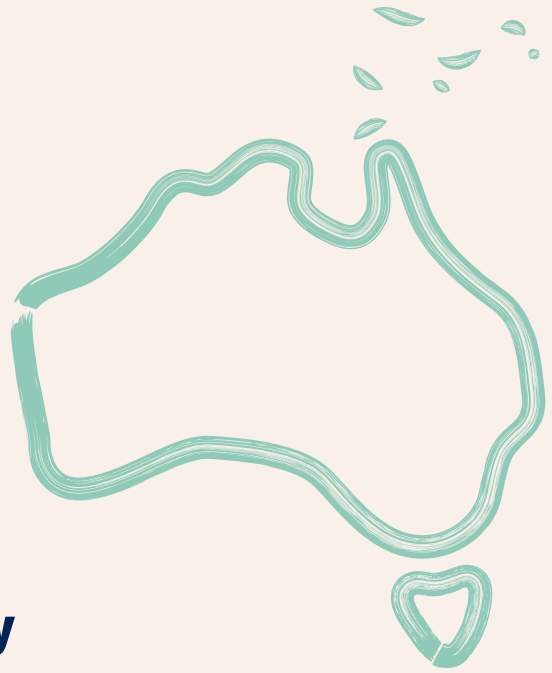
TOOLKIT



**Our
Watch**

Preventing violence
against women

June 2026



Acknowledgement of Country

Our Watch acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land across Australia on which we work and live. We pay respects to Elders past and present and recognise the continuing connection Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have to land, culture, knowledge, and language for over 65,000 years.

As a non-Aboriginal organisation, Our Watch understands that violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children is an issue for the whole community. As highlighted in Our Watch's national resource *Changing the picture*, the evidence clearly shows the intersection between racism, sexism, and violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

Our Watch has an ongoing commitment to the prevention of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children, who continue to suffer from violence at a significantly higher rate than non-Aboriginal women. We acknowledge all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations who continue to lead the work of sharing knowledge with non-Indigenous people and relentlessly advocate for an equitable, violence-free future in Australia.



What and how leaders communicate to their employees and stakeholders about sexual harassment has a considerable impact on people's attitudes.

Research shows that whether CEOs emphasise the severity of the problem or downplay the issue, they significantly affect whether staff see sexual harassment as a high-priority issue. This pattern holds irrespective of gender or political affiliation.¹

Creating a safe, gender equal and respectful workplace starts with leadership setting clear expectations for acceptable behaviour and reinforcing communication to help employees understand and address issues. Leadership teams set the tone for workplace culture. That's why leadership's commitment to preventing workplace violence is crucial, as their actions shape policies and influence workplace behaviours.

This toolkit includes two parts:

- 1 A tip sheet** focused on gaining leadership support for promoting gender equality and respect in the workplace. This is for HR, People and Culture, or Diversity, Equality and Inclusion (DEI) managers.
- 2 Handouts** that HR, People and Culture, or DEI managers can give leaders so support them with practical steps to embed gender equality and respect in business practices.

Read the tip sheet first, then share the handouts with your leadership champions.

Tip sheet for engaging leaders

HANDOUT

Leadership matters

The commitments and actions of senior executives and board members are pivotal to transforming the attitudes, behaviours, and structures that perpetuate violence against women. Without their engagement, efforts to create safe, respectful, and gender-equal workplaces cannot succeed or last.

When leaders, boards, CEOs, and senior executives, step up they:

- drive change by using their authority to mandate action and model equality and respect
- signal commitment by identifying what must change and allocating resources to make it happen
- empower staff to speak up and act against sexism and discrimination, knowing leadership and policy have their back.

Engaging leaders isn't optional. It is the foundation for lasting workplace equality and respect.

Please note that this tip sheet is for general information only and does not constitute legal advice or material that is tailored specifically for your organisation or circumstances.

TIP 1

Use your understanding to bring senior executives on the journey, and make it theirs

Familiarise yourself with key facts on what drives workplace gender-based violence (including sexual harassment) and how this can be prevented by using the Workplace Equality and Respect Model and supporting tools.

Consider focusing on training senior executives or engaging them in conversation about this issue before you train other staff. Doing so will ensure there is a strong shared understanding of the need for change before questions or critiques arise.

TIP 2

Identify individual champions in your workplace

Individual champions, whether formal or informal leaders, play a crucial role in challenging the attitudes, behaviours and structures that drive workplace gender-based violence. However, driving change alone can be difficult, and champions may feel overwhelmed when barriers arise.

Consider establishing a small team responsible for supporting individual workplace champions, progressing the Workplace Equality and Respect Model and supporting your legislative obligations. When selecting members, look for people who demonstrate leadership, regardless of their position title. This may include informal or middle-management who are trusted, influential and well-placed to champion the work and help bring senior leaders along on the journey.

TIP 3

Build a business case

Your business case should make an ethical case for preventing violence against women, including sexual harassment, alongside highlighting:

- the ways that gender inequality impacts your workplace and your core business
- opportunities for change
- the benefits of taking active steps to address the drivers of violence against women
- the risk and cost of inaction.

Pointers for building a business case

- **Highlight** how promoting gender equality and preventing workplace gender-based violence (including sexual harassment) aligns with existing organisational values, goals and priorities.
- **Draw attention** to legal obligations. The new *Anti-Discrimination and Human Rights Legislation Amendment (Respect at Work) Act 2022 (Cth)*:
 - prohibits conduct that subjects another person to a workplace environment that is hostile on the grounds of sex
 - introduces a positive duty on employers to take reasonable and proportionate measures to eliminate unlawful sex discrimination, including sexual harassment, as far as possible.

- **Show senior leaders that gender inequality exists.** What's happening in your workplace is what will interest them the most. They must be convinced of a problem before supporting a change initiative. Use facts and figures to make your case.
- **Consult** with your employees (via surveys, focus groups, and informal consultations) to understand their experience of equality and respect in your workplace. Use the information and insights gathered to identify how gender influences and shapes their working lives. Examine any data you regularly collect and create a comprehensive organisational dashboard (and report to the Workplace Gender Equality Agency if you have over 100 employees). See the [Workplace Gender Equality Agency \(WGEA\) website](#) and resources for more information.
- **Call attention** to the financial and non-financial costs of inaction. Workplace gender-based violence affects workplaces in many costly ways, including increased absenteeism and staff turnover, lost productivity, and decreased job satisfaction and staff morale. There is also evidence that promoting gender equality and respect can have significant financial benefits for workplaces. According to Deloitte Access Economics, in 2018:
 - workplace sexual harassment cost \$2.6 billion in lost productivity and \$0.9 billion in other financial costs
 - each case of harassment represents around four working days of lost output
 - employers bore 70% of the financial costs, the government 23% and individuals 7%
 - on average, lost well-being for victims was an additional \$250 million, or nearly \$5,000 per victim/survivor.

- **Underscore** the fact that employees and stakeholders *expect* action to prevent workplace gender-based violence. A VicHealth study showed that:¹
 - 98% of respondents expect employers to ensure women have the same opportunities as men.
 - 94% of respondents agreed that employers should take a leadership role in educating their workforce about respectful relationships between men and women.
- **Showcase examples** of what other workplaces and individuals are doing. There is considerable commitment and momentum within Australian society for equality and respect and the prevention of workplace gender-based violence. This includes individuals and all levels of government, the media, workplaces, sports organisations, and communities. In building your business case, it may be strategic

to highlight examples, case studies and learnings of workplaces and individuals to help drive leaders' commitment to and engagement in this work. WGEA collates data and benchmarks for gender equality indicators, like flexible work, the representation of men and women in senior leadership, and how many workplaces have family violence leave policies. The data is presented nationally and by industry (see the [WGEA Data Explorer](#)).

Handouts for leaders

People and Culture teams and DEI teams can use these handouts to guide your leadership teams in building a safe, respectful and gender-equal workplace. It outlines the practical steps that you can suggest they champion across culture, strategy and operations.



Leadership commitment checklist

HANDOUT

Effective prevention starts with honest self-reflection

As a first step support your leadership team to engage in this process.

Before leading change across the organisation, it's important for senior leaders to pause and assess their own understanding, commitment and readiness to champion gender equality and the prevention of violence against women. Self-reflection helps you recognise both your strengths and the areas where further learning or investment is needed.

Give your leadership team this checklist which can support them to reflect on the foundations they need to bring to this work both personally and collectively.

Engaging leaders

If your leadership team cannot tick every item on this checklist, prioritise closing those gaps before launching your initiatives to promote gender equality and respect in the workplace. This may include scheduling leadership training on the role of workplaces in preventing sexual harassment and gender-based violence, clarifying responsibilities, or securing resources. Strong leadership buy-in is essential—without it, your initiative will struggle to succeed.



Are these leadership commitments in place?

- ☐ Supporting and modelling gender equality and respect.
- ☐ Taking steps to ensure the workplace is a safe space for staff to discuss inequality, discrimination, or violence, without fear of adverse treatment.
- ☐ Learning about and addressing the gendered drivers of violence against women.
- ☐ Understand that addressing the gendered drivers of violence requires investing in organisational culture change.
- ☐ Building an understanding of how gender inequality intersects with racism, ableism, homophobia and other forms of discrimination, and ensuring our actions reflect this.
- ☐ Regularly and visibly communicating to all staff our commitment to gender equality, respect, and the prevention of sexual harassment and gender-based violence.
- ☐ Focusing on embedding gender equality and respectful conduct into leadership KPIs, performance reviews and accountability systems.
- ☐ Collecting data and feedback to inform and strengthen our efforts to build gender equality and prevent violence against women.
- ☐ Reviewing data and feedback regularly and taking timely, transparent action to address identified risks, gaps or emerging issues.
- ☐ Developing strategies, policies, and procedures to promote gender equality and support workplace prevention of violence against women.
- ☐ Regularly reviewing organisational systems, such as recruitment, promotion, remuneration and complaints processes, to eliminate bias and ensure safety, fairness and transparency.
- ☐ Ensuring psychosocial safety (including preventing sexual harassment) is embedded in our risk management framework and monitored at the executive level.
- ☐ Ensuring staff have multiple, safe and confidential avenues to report concerns or incidents, and that disclosures are responded to appropriately and respectfully.
- ☐ Resourcing efforts to promote workplace gender equality and prevent violence against women, including identifying key staff to lead these actions and initiatives.
- ☐ Ensuring ongoing, role-appropriate training across the workplace to build understanding of respectful behaviours, active bystander responsibilities and prevention of gender-based violence.
- ☐ Embedding Safety by Design principles across all digital systems, platforms and communication channels to ensure technology-enabled interactions are safe, respectful, inclusive and free from harassment or discrimination. This includes designing for safety, privacy and accessibility, proactively addressing risks such as online harassment, technology misuse and gender-based harm, and considering user safety in procurement, system design, data management and internal communication tools.
- ☐ Seeking expert guidance and engaging with industry partners, communities of practice or prevention specialists to strengthen our approach.

Practical actions to implement Workplace Equality and Respect

How you lead and the visibility of that leadership makes a difference. Make Our Watch's Workplace Equality and Respect Model part of our workplace's core values

The Workplace Equality and Respect Model provides a practical framework for building a safer, fairer, and more gender-equal workplace. It's flexible and can be tailored to our needs. It can also support our planning around psychosocial risks, helping us strengthen what's working and close any gaps.

The Workplace Equality and Respect Model



Based on the Workplace Equality and Respect Model, here are some **practical actions** for you as a leadership team to consider

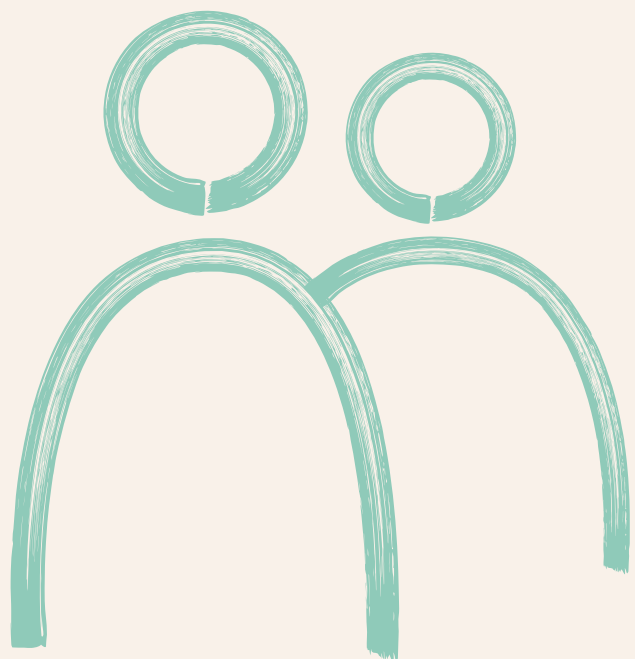


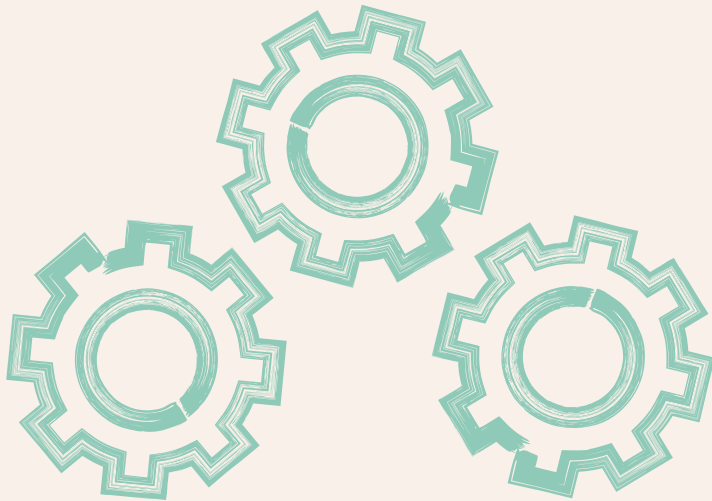
Strategy and planning

- To know how to lead to prevent sexual harassment and workplace gender-based violence, build your understanding of the key drivers of violence against women.
- Invest in understanding your workplace's formal and informal culture so you can promote positive norms, values, and behaviours that encourage a diverse, inclusive, gender-equal workplace.
- Be vocal about your commitment to inclusion and gender equality and clearly communicate this commitment to all employees and stakeholders.
- Build into leadership communication, policy, and practice that speaking up and taking action against gender-based violence is everyone's responsibility and a workplace health and safety obligation.
- Stay informed by maintaining oversight of incidents, promoting regular reporting and ensuring that the actions of executives and board members are data-informed.
- Create a well-resourced team tasked with achieving gender equality which considers all the diversity of people's identities and experiences in the workplace.
- Seek opportunities to positively influence gender equality in your engagements with clients, customers, suppliers and communities.
- Seek input from all staff on prevention measures and use their feedback to guide improvements.
- Create a culture of safety and respect where you support employees who report harassment.
- Regularly participate in training on diversity, inclusion, and sexual harassment prevention.
- Hold all levels of staff accountable for their actions regarding respect and inclusivity.

Workplace culture

- Model inclusive, respectful leadership in all interactions with employees and external stakeholders.
- Invest in ongoing workplace-wide learning and capacity-building tailored to roles and responsibilities. The purpose of these initiatives should be to have staff understand:
 - the range of behaviours that constitute sexual harassment and what drives this behaviour
 - the importance of workplace contributions to preventing gendered-based violence
 - the value of being an active bystander, and employees' role in prevention and response to sexual harassment.
- Ensure that all learning/training materials, corporate events and resources that address sexual harassment recognise the diverse experiences and needs of workers, including women, LGBTIQ+ workers, Culturally And Racially Diverse workers and workers with disability.
- Celebrate positive behaviours that promote safe, inclusive and respectful workplaces, and acknowledge employees who take active steps to prevent and respond to sexual harassment in your workplace.
- Join communities of practice (such as Champions of Change) to peer-learn from other leaders how to implement and sustain positive workplace change.
- Access a mentor if appropriate.
- Participate in industry-specific gender equality and diversity and inclusion initiatives and advocacy.
- Instruct people managers to regularly communicate about respectful conduct, the workplace's stance on sexual harassment, and the consequences for perpetrators.
- Provide employees with tools and language to help them safely raise concerns about inappropriate behaviour in the moment and/or support those who may be impacted (active bystander training).





Everyday operations

- Establish (and promote from the top) a common framework and language for identifying, reporting and responding to sexual harassment.
- Ensure that organisational systems, processes and communications recognise sexual harassment and gender-based violence as a type of workplace harm and risk.
- Sponsor policies and procedures that support a commitment to gender equality and the prevention of sexual harassment and other forms of gender-based violence so employees of all genders feel safe and supported.
- Proactively support the development and implementation of workplace policies that enable all employees to balance caring and work responsibilities, including parental leave (*encourage* men who are becoming parents to take leave) and flexible work policies (including working from home, job sharing, and part-time hours). These should be accessible to all employees. Use the 'If not, why not?' logic to support your decision-making. Senior leaders should demonstrate the use of these policies.
- Implement other leave provisions that foster a gender-inclusive and culturally supportive work environment including (but not limited to):
 - Sorry Business for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff, in acknowledgment of their cultural obligations
 - floating public holidays for staff of different religious, cultural and political beliefs
 - domestic violence leave
 - gender affirmation leave.
- Use recruitment and promotion strategies to create a diverse workforce (across gender identity, race, ability, sexual orientation, age, and other identity markers).
- Ensure recruitment and promotion strategies and processes include criteria for fostering a safe, respectful and inclusive organisational culture and modelling this conduct.
- Articulate this focus on safety, respect, gender equality and inclusion in all recruitment materials, contracts and performance management frameworks.
- Analyse remuneration practices to close any identified gender pay gaps.

- Introduce clear guidelines and principles around confidentiality and transparency for high-profile sexual harassment cases, in line with the emerging advice from Respect@Work on removing non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) from the process.
- Make sure internal teams can respond appropriately to bullying, discrimination and sexual harassment (this may include having contact officers or managers trained in managing disclosures).
- Create a workplace environment in which it is safe for people to speak up via anonymous reporting channels. You might not be able to act on an anonymous complaint, but you will be able to identify 'hot spots' and areas of risk in your business.
- Make promoting gender equality and preventing sexual harassment and other forms of gender-based violence a leadership priority by:
 - establishing good practice
 - ensuring that your workplace's risk management approach addresses non-financial risks, like psychosocial risks (which includes sexual harassment)
 - collaborating with industry partners and prevention experts to develop a collective approach to preventing sexual harassment.
- Measure the impact of leadership on changing organisational culture.
- Set, endorse, and regularly review gender equality and diversity targets.

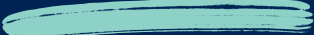
You can find out more about next steps through the [Our Watch Workplaces website](#) with all the toolkits that you need to implement the Workplace Equality and Respect Model.



Endnotes

- 1 Hart, Chloe Grace, Alison Dahl Crossley & Shelley J. Correll (2018). *Leader Messaging and Attitudes Toward Sexual Violence*. *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World*, 4, 1–11.

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