

Tip sheet: Addressing and reducing resistance to preventing sexual harassment and violence against women

This tip sheet is for anyone who is tasked with implementing initiatives within a workplace to promote gender equality and respect, and stop sexual harassment and violence against women before it starts.

# Be strategic

* Anticipate resistance – it is inevitable – and develop a plan for how you might address it. Not all types of resistance are the same, so a one-size-fits-all response will not work. To identify different types of resistance, and the best ways to address them, see [*Framework for Identifying and Addressing Resistance & Backlash* [PDF download]](https://www.respectvictoria.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/202208/Tool%20for%20Identifying%20and%20Addressing%20Resistance%20and%20Backlash%20%281%29_0.PDF).
* You may not convince everyone on the importance of primary prevention and gender equality. Focus on the ‘moveable middle’ – the group between the entrenched opposition—those who will never ‘move’ from their position—and the fully committed—those who already support primary prevention. Whereas the moveable middle is curious but may need more convincing to become committed to change. According to VicHealth, ‘drawing on our allies (others committed to equality) to work closely with, and then focusing on the ‘moveable middle’, is where change can most effectively begin.’[[1]](#footnote-2)
* Identify possible sites for resistance, recognising that it could come from unexpected sources (for example, someone in a position of leadership or influence and whose influence may have broad reach). You may wish to consider which employees or teams might be most affected by the advancement of gender equality in your workplace, or whether some sites or teams show more disrespect towards women (for example, a site where it is known that sexist jokes are common). Similarly, whether any employees are known to have used violence in the past, or whether some employees or teams have demonstrated strong adherence to gender roles and stereotypes.
* Before commencing any organisational culture change initiatives focusing on preventing sexual harassment, ensure you have processes in place to support employee welfare (for example, Employee Assistance Programs), including appropriate referral pathways in case someone discloses experiences of violence.

# Communicate, communicate, communicate

* Regularly communicate with employees using various communication channels (meetings, emails, intranet, etc.) to inform them of upcoming changes and why the organisation needs to adopt them.
* Communicate how the changes align with organisational values and leadership priorities.
* Ensure all communications include contact information so employees know who to speak to about proposed changes.
* Provide opportunities for people to ask questions and give feedback – for example, during team meetings or training, at lunchtime briefings, via question-and-answer sessions, or by providing a contact to answer questions privately or via email. It is also important to consider how you will report to staff about concerns raised and let them know if and how they will be addressed.
* Communicate how resistance that contravenes workplace policies or current legislation will be dealt with. Be explicit about unacceptable behaviours and practices by naming common types of resistance that will not be tolerated (e.g. denial that sexual harassment or gender discrimination is a problem in workplaces)
* Develop communications and information packages for employees who are leading organisational culture change that they can draw on when responding to resistance in various forums, including online (emails, social media). Draft sample responses to resistance that may be encountered in employee conversations, meetings with external stakeholders, customers, clients and members, and public forums or presentations.
* Proactively communicate and model respectful behaviours, for example through a clearly stated commitment by workplace leaders to preventing violence against women and promoting gender equality and respectful behaviour. This can be used to counter views and behaviours that undermine the validity of gender equality as an organisational goal. The statement could read something like this:

Our commitment to promoting gender equality for the prevention of violence against women is unequivocal and has the full support of the Board [or other governance structure] and all levels of management within the workplace.

In all our work roles and functions, we will demonstrate our commitment to gender equality and respect. We will reject sexism and discriminatory attitudes and confront resistant or hostile attitudes and behaviours that undermine our efforts to promote gender equality and respect.

# Upskill employees

* Identify and upskill key employees you consider most appropriate to deal with resistance when it occurs and who can lead potentially difficult conversations about gender inequality and the need for change. This may be formal and informal leaders in the workplace who are, or become, committed to primary prevention and gender equality goals. Provide them with training and information packages with key messaging so that they can answer questions about gender equality and violence prevention. In particular, senior executives and managers must be informed about what is expected of them in terms of modelling the organisational commitment to promoting gender equality to prevent violence against women and managing discussions or comments that express different forms of resistance appropriately.
* Build employee capacity to manage difficult conversations. Some simple strategies to discuss with your employees:
  + **Be present** in the conversation. Acknowledge that you have heard the other person’s question or concern. Remember that it is easy to misunderstand the concern being expressed. Use active listening to focus on what the person is saying and what is happening during the conversation. For example, ‘Listening to what you have said …’
  + **Be open**. If you always need to be right or have the final say in a conversation, that will not allow people to have an open and safe discussion with you. Look for common ground and values you both agree on. For example, if someone asks about men as victims, you might begin the discussion by acknowledging that you both have a concern for all victims of violence.
  + **Be prepared**. Do your homework on who you will be talking to and what their concerns might be. Make sure you have at hand the right information and evidence about gender equality and the drivers of violence against women and sexual harassment. Plan your conversations and be prepared for the types of questions that might be asked.
  + **Practise** talking about violence against women and gender equality. Talking about these issues is not generally something we do every day. Practise responding in short, clear statements, and use evidence and true examples.
  + **Make time for self-reflection**. Reflect on how your discussions went and the assumptions and values you bring to your work.
  + **Respect the other person**. Respect that people come from different starting points, and acknowledge that engaging with these issues can mean changing entrenched attitudes and, behaviours and can have very real impacts on how people view and live in the world.[[2]](#footnote-3)

# Further information

**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>

1. Vic Health. (2018). (En)countering resistance: Strategies to respond to resistance to gender equality initiatives. Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, Melbourne. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Women’s Health West. (2020). [Communications Guidelines For Preventing Violence Against Women](https://www.whin.org.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/03/WHIN_Communications-Guidelines_WEB_Final9_6_20.pdf). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)