

Workplace Equality and Respect Model

SOLE TRADERS AND SMALL WORKPLACES



**Our
Watch**

Preventing violence
against women

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.



"Our work lives have a significant influence on us professionally and personally, and help shape our attitudes, beliefs and behaviours around gender and violence against women."

— Our Watch Workplaces Team

Other acknowledgements

The Workplace Equality and Respect Model builds on the original 2014 Workplace Equality and Respect Standards. The revised model, developed by the Our Watch team, Dr Anuradha Mundkur, Alisha Taylor-Jones, and Maria Coviello, reflects the evolution of legislative frameworks to prevent violence against women and incorporates intersectional approaches to strengthen its foundations.

We also acknowledge the valuable contributions and expertise of the following individuals, whose input helped refine and enhance the model:

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PART 1

Workplace Equality and Respect Model

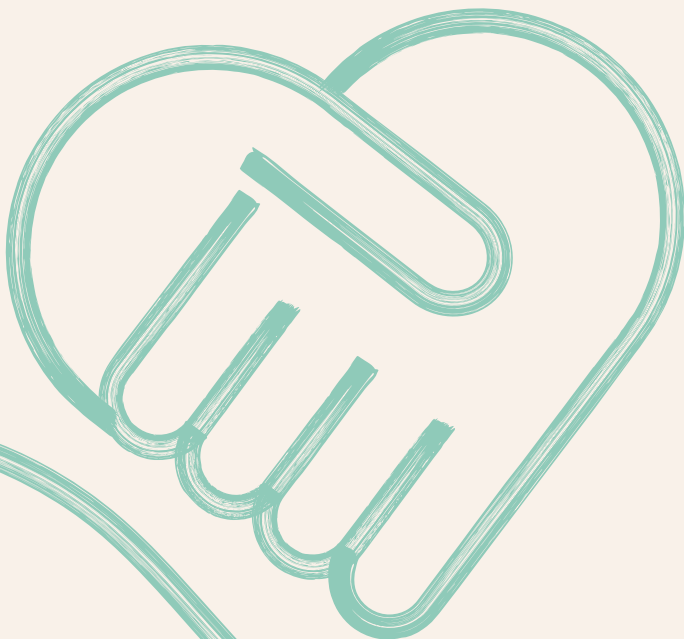
“Workplace cultures that normalise inequality also normalise abuse. When women and gender-diverse people are marginalised, underrepresented, or unheard, violence can flourish unchecked.”

— **Respect@Work Report,**
Australian Human Rights Commission¹

Why a Workplace Equality and Respect Model?

Creating a workplace culture that values gender equality and respect is a powerful driver of safety and is critical for preventing gender-based violence at work. To create workplaces that are free from gender-based violence, you need to actively promote gender equality.²

Why? Whether it shows up in pay gaps, imbalances in leadership teams, or everyday disrespect, gender inequality creates the conditions where harassment and violence can take hold. When you lead with fairness and respect, people feel safe speaking up, contributing, and thriving. You’ll attract top talent, mitigate risks, and foster a stronger, more resilient workplace.





No matter what kind of organisation you are part of, whether you're a sole trader, running a small business, working in a community group, a large company, the public sector, or a non-profit, you have a role to play in creating a workplace culture that values gender equality, respect, and inclusion.

Building this kind of culture helps you meet your legal responsibilities, protect your people from harm, and build a strong, trusted reputation in your community and sector.

When everyone feels safe, respected, and included, your organisation becomes a better place to work, collaborate, and grow.

Why does workplace equality and respect matter?

Creating gender-equal and respectful workplaces is not just the right thing to do, it also gives your workplace a strategic advantage. Workplaces that fail to meet these standards face significant legal, financial, and reputational risks. Leaders in this space strengthen their brand, attract top talent, and unlock higher levels of employee engagement and performance.³

It's also important to recognise that people experience work differently depending on things like their age, disability, gender identity, and their race or ethnicity. When you design your workplace with these differences in mind, you create an environment where everyone feels safe, respected, and able to contribute.

Workplaces are always changing. Whether you're working remotely, in a hybrid setup, or using new digital tools, the way you run things can either support or undermine gender equality and respect. It all depends on how those systems are designed and managed. People today expect fairness, safety, and respect—not just in how they're treated, but in

how work gets done. That's why it's essential to incorporate gender equality and respect into your culture, processes, and physical and online spaces. The choices you make now will shape whether your workplace repeats old patterns or sets a new standard for safety, fairness, and inclusion.

Creating safe and respectful digital workplaces

In today's workplaces, online spaces and digital tools are central to how we communicate and collaborate, from email and instant messaging to collaboration platforms and social media, but they also carry risks that can impact respect and safety. In Australian workplaces, tech-based gender-based violence can include harassment via messaging apps, inappropriate or abusive comments on internal platforms, stalking through social media, or the misuse of features like message deletion to conceal abuse. These risks are amplified by the immediacy and openness of digital communication, the diversity of stakeholders interacting with these tools, enhanced online monitoring capacity used to stalk staff, and limited monitoring or response capacity. This is an emerging area of work that requires organisations to think critically about the tools they use, how they are configured, and the cultural and policy settings that govern them. Intervening through workplace culture, clear policies, and tool features can help mitigate harm and create safer and more respectful online environments.⁴



The business case for gender equality and respect^{5, 6, 7}

- Improvement in women's workplace wellbeing and the wellbeing of employees of all genders. Gender-based violence at work is linked to anxiety, depression, burnout, and absenteeism, costing the Australian economy over \$3.8 billion annually.⁸
- Higher morale and better teamwork, lower absenteeism, higher productivity, reduced burnout, and better safety outcomes. An evaluation of the Gender Equality Seal program, which aims to help businesses close gender gaps and improve workplace culture, was rolled out across 14 countries in over 750 companies. The evaluation found that when businesses take real steps to promote gender equality, everyone benefits.⁹
- Better performing organisations with more innovation, cohesion, and resilience. Attracting top talent, adapting well to change, and mitigating costly risks such as turnover and reputational harm. As the

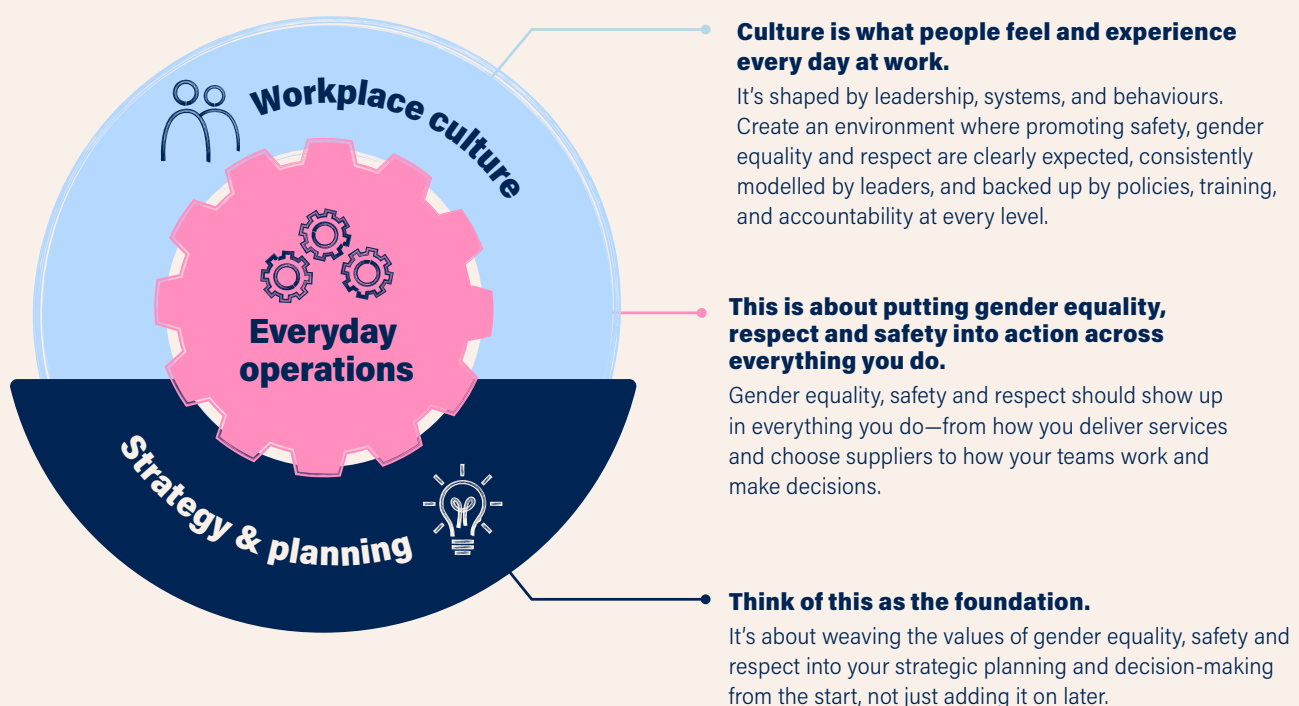
Boston Consulting Group notes, inclusive workplaces build engaged, productive, and collaborative teams with lower attrition.¹⁰

What you can do

Recent changes to the Sex Discrimination Act and Work Health and Safety laws mean workplaces now have a positive duty to actively mitigate risk and prevent discrimination, harassment, and psychosocial harm. Meeting these obligations isn't just about ticking boxes, it's about creating a culture where safety, gender equality, and respect are part of how you lead, work, and grow.

The Workplace Equality and Respect Model provides a practical framework for building a safer, fairer, and more gender-equal workplace. It's flexible, so you can tailor it to your size, sector, and where you're at, whether you're just starting out or already have strategies in place. It also supports your planning around psychosocial risks, helping you strengthen what's working and close any gaps.

The Workplace Equality and Respect Model





Strategy and planning in practice

- **Plan with purpose:** Make gender equality and respectful workplace practices part of your planning. They can be applied across a wide range of areas, from your goals and risk management to your policies on harassment, flexible work, parental leave, recruitment, and performance reviews. These values should be built into the way your workplace operates, not added on later.
- **Use data to guide decisions:** Set up ways to track how you're doing on gender equality, inclusion, and safety. Use that information to keep improving.
- **Stay on top of your legal responsibilities:** Make sure your planning includes your obligations under anti-discrimination and workplace safety laws. It helps you reduce legal risk and protect your reputation.

Examples of actions

- ✓ Set clear goals around gender equality and respectful behaviours in strategic plans.
- ✓ Review and update policies related to harassment, flexible work arrangements, parental leave, recruitment, and performance reviews to ensure they reflect inclusive and respectful practices.
- ✓ Include gender equality in risk assessments to proactively identify and address potential issues.
- ✓ Set targets, such as gender-balanced leadership, and monitor progress over time.

Workplace culture in practice

- **Lead with purpose:** Ensure that you and your leadership team set the tone by modelling respectful behaviour that values fairness, equity, and mutual respect — and reinforcing it through everyday actions. Equip your managers with the skills they need to support diverse teams, address issues confidently, and create a workplace where everyone feels safe, heard, and valued.
- **Check your systems:** Look at things like pay, promotions, and who's in leadership roles. Running equity checks helps you spot and fix barriers that might be holding people back.
- **Hire and grow fairly:** Build recruitment and development processes that are fair, inclusive, transparent, and reflect the importance of gender equality, so you can attract and keep great people from all backgrounds.

Examples of actions

- ✓ Develop safety, respect and gender equality KPIs tied to leaders' goals, promotion, and pay. This matters because what leaders tolerate is the number one predictor of harassment risk.
- ✓ Support high-risk teams where culture is slipping. This can be done through facilitated sessions on what respect looks like in their workplace, activities where staff co-create behavioural norms and practice, and reflection exercises to reinforce those norms.



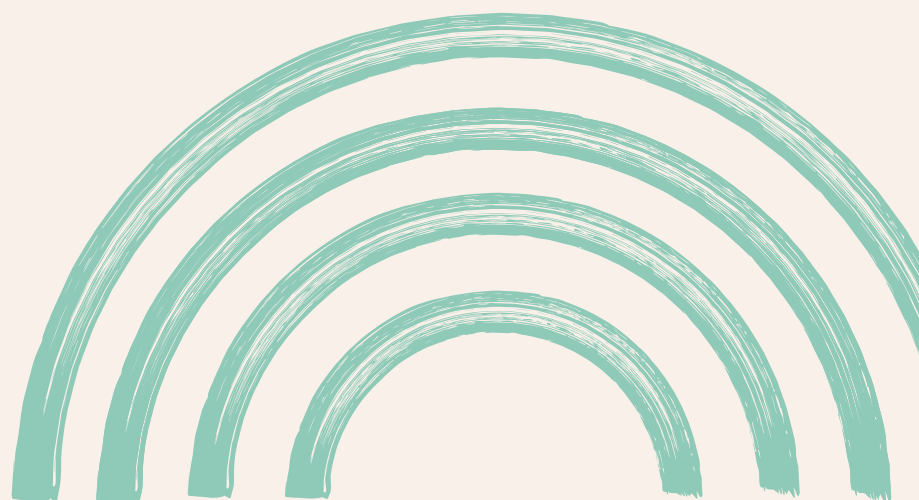
Everyday operations

- **Create safer workplaces:** You can set up clear, confidential, and trauma-informed ways for people to report and respond to workplace misconduct and sexual harassment. This helps build trust and shows your commitment to safety and respect.
- **Engage clients and communities inclusively:** When you design and deliver services, make sure they're accessible, culturally responsive, and inclusive of all genders. Pay particular attention to groups who often face disadvantage or discrimination.
- **Work with ethical suppliers and partners:** You have the power to shape procurement and partnerships by embedding gender equality, safety and respect into your supplier codes of conduct and decision-making criteria. It's a great way to extend your values beyond your own organisation.
- **Communicate with integrity:** Through your marketing and internal and external communications you can challenge outdated gender norms. Use gender-inclusive language and visuals, like showing women in leadership or technical roles, and men in caregiving roles or taking carer leave.

- **Design inclusive spaces:** Think about lighting, noise control, privacy, and other psychosocial factors. Inclusive design principles that support policies on safety, respect and gender equality can ensure everyone feels welcome and valued in the workplace.

Examples of actions

- ✓ Treat sexual harassment as a preventable work design risk, which is named as a formal hazard in the risk register.
- ✓ Consult with employees on risk prevalence and mitigation, run annual risk assessments, and redesign risky roles and situations.
- ✓ Co-design safe reporting channels (more than just HR), committing to fast handling and auditing for retaliation risks.





Setting the scene

CASE STUDY

Emma J Photography's casual assistant hire

At Emma J Photography, a sole trader portrait business, professionalism and creativity were seen as the heart of success. Emma prided herself on offering a warm, personal experience: 'like working with a friend,' she often said. Most clients appreciated her easy-going nature, and her small studio had built a loyal following.

When Emma started taking on larger projects, she hired casual assistants to help with lighting, styling, and equipment. One of them, Sophie, was an enthusiastic and talented young woman just starting out in the industry. For several weeks, they worked together on shoots for a regular client, a well-known real estate agent.

Over time, the client began making comments about Sophie's appearance. Then they started messaging her outside work hours, sending compliments and 'jokes.' Sophie laughed them off at first, not wanting to upset a client that Emma valued. The comments continued, sometimes in front of others, and Sophie began dreading those jobs.

When Sophie's work performance dipped, Emma assumed she was distracted or struggling with workload. She didn't ask what was wrong. When Sophie finally confided that the client's behaviour made her uncomfortable, Emma told

her 'he's just like that with everyone' and encouraged her to ignore it.

A few weeks later, the client sent Sophie an inappropriate message after a late-night shoot. Sophie stopped responding and decided not to renew her contract with Emma.

Sophie's experience revealed deeper issues:

- a culture that blurred personal warmth with professional boundaries
- a belief that 'small businesses don't need policies'
- a lack of clarity about the responsibilities of a sole trader toward contractors and clients
- no guidance for how to handle inappropriate client behaviour
- no trusted or confidential way for workers to raise concerns.

Emma never intended harm, but her inaction allowed disrespect to go unchecked and ultimately caused harm to a valued colleague and her own reputation.

What could the workplace in the case study have done differently, and what can it do now?

By using the [Workplace Gender Equality and Respect Model](#) and [How-to guide: Leading gender equality, safety and respect](#), workplaces can move from inaction to real prevention through fostering a workplace where everyone feels safe to speak up, and gender equality, safety, and respect are built into everyday decisions, systems, and behaviours.

Source: This scenario is inspired by the real-life stories from the Australian Human Rights Commission's [A Bad Business – Case Studies](#).



PART 2

How-to-guide: Leading gender equality, safety and respect

As a sole trader, micro-business owner, or person in charge of a workplace with fewer than 20 people, you play a powerful role in shaping the workplace culture.

Running a small organisation or a micro-business comes with plenty of rewards and challenges. On top of delivering your actual work, there's all the time spent working on the organisation: things like BAS, certifications, and facility approvals can really add up, especially when it comes to compliance. Being subject to unsafe or unwelcome behaviours from customers, clients, suppliers, or colleagues is the last thing you need. As a small business owner or sole trader, you've got a lot on your plate and keeping your workplace safe, fair, and respectful is part of that. You may already be aware of your responsibilities under Workplace Health and Safety and Fair Work laws, but did you know there is also a requirement called a positive duty? It's part of the Respect@Work reforms made through recent amendments to the Sex Discrimination Act. It means you're expected to take proactive steps to prevent things like sex discrimination, sexual harassment, and victimisation before they happen.

It's also important to remember that Work Health and Safety (WHS) laws don't just cover physical risks like faulty equipment or trip hazards, they also include psychosocial hazards. These are things that can affect someone's mental health

and wellbeing. That means you're responsible for preventing things like sexual harassment, bullying, and discrimination in your workplace.

Now, bigger companies often have HR teams, formal policies, and reporting systems. You might not have all that and that's okay. What matters is that you still take steps to create a workplace that's equal, safe, and respectful.

That means:

- leading by example
- putting inclusive practices in place
- listening to your team (if you have one)
- ensuring everyone feels safe and respected.

When you build a workplace based on gender equality, safety, and respect, you're not only creating a better environment for your team, you're also helping to prevent gender-based violence, including sexual harassment. And yes, you have a legal duty to do so.

This guide will help you figure out what that looks like for your workplace and provide realistic, practical actions that work for small teams or solo operators. Workplaces of different sizes have different obligations and resources.

» You can find more information for small workplaces with 21–99 employees and medium to large businesses on the [Our Watch website](#).



Remember, people experience the workplace differently

Everyone experiences work differently. Things like our background, gender, age, disability, sexuality, or culture all shape how we show up and how others see us. These differences can affect what feels safe, fair, or welcoming at work.

For example, a woman with a disability may face different barriers than one without, and a lesbian woman with a disability might face extra challenges because of how people view sexuality and disability.

Sometimes, workplace practices unintentionally exclude people, like holding events at night that make it hard for those with caring responsibilities to attend.

As a sole trader or small workplace, it's worth stopping to think:

- Do I face any barriers myself because of who I am?
- Could the way I run my workplace be making it harder for others to take part, feel safe, or feel respected?
- How do the systems, policies, or assumed ways of working in my workplace impact others?

Small changes can make a big difference to how included and respected people feel.

Resources



» [Intersectionality in the workplace: A starter kit for flexible work and talent management](#) is a starting point for workplaces to promote inclusive gender equality as a key approach to fostering workplace equality and respect.

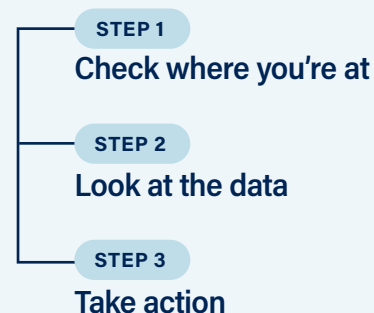
» [Creating safe, equal and respectful workplaces for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women: A beginner's guide](#), which draws on the evidence base of *Changing the picture: A national resource to support the prevention of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and their children*, to guide efforts to prevent violence and promote respectful, safe, and inclusive workplace environments.

» [Creating safety, equality, inclusion and respect for women with disabilities in the workplace: A guide](#), offering practical guidance on fostering accessibility and inclusion, informed by the evidence base of *Changing the landscape: A national resource to prevent violence against women and girls with disabilities*.

» [Pride in Prevention Evidence Guide](#) from Rainbow Health Victoria, as well as in *Pride in Diversity's Australian Workplace Equality Index (AWEI)* publications.

Next

Follow these 3 steps:





How-to-guide: Check where you're at

STEP 1

Check where you're at

Before you dive into making changes, take a moment to reflect on where things stand in your workplace. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Are the people in leadership with me on this? Are they ready to support a respectful and inclusive culture?
- Do I understand my legal responsibilities around promoting gender equality, safety, and respect?
- Have I thought about the values I want my workplace to reflect?
- Am I ready to set boundaries with clients, suppliers, or collaborators if they behave disrespectfully?

Take a quick self-check

Gender-based violence at work, like sexual harassment, often happens when there's unfair treatment, stereotypes, or a lack of respect toward certain people. Even as a sole trader or a small business, you can set the tone and the standard for equal, safe and respectful interactions.

If you're curious about why these issues happen and what you can do to stop them, there are some great free resources to help you build your understanding.

Below you'll find two handouts, [Setting myself up for success](#) and the ['Am I ready?' starter scan](#). They're here to help you reflect on your readiness to start building a workplace that's safe, equal, and respectful.

Resources



» [Link between gender inequality and violence](#). Learn how gender inequality contributes to violence and harassment.

» [How to take an intersectional approach](#). Understand how different identities and experiences affect the risk and impact of violence.

» [Free events and webinars](#). Join free webinars and training sessions to learn how to create safer, more respectful workplaces.



Setting myself up for success

HANDOUT

There are practical and logistical considerations for undertaking this work (including resourcing time, personnel, expertise, and finances). See if you have all the building blocks in place before you begin:

1. **Have you committed to creating a safe, equal, and respectful workplace? If not, you can check out Our Watch's [Engaging leadership teams](#).**

☐ Yes

☐ No

2. **a) Do you have expertise you can draw upon to implement Workplace Equality and Respect?**

☐ Yes

☐ No

- b) Have you checked in with these people to see if they have the capacity to assist?**

☐ Yes

☐ No

3. **Do you have the time and budget to support this work meaningfully?**

☐ Yes

☐ No

4. **Do you have trusted channels for feedback on workplace culture issues that collaborators, staff, or subcontractors can use?**

☐ Yes

☐ No

5. **Have you been trained in addressing discrimination, sexual harassment, and domestic and family violence disclosures in the workplace?**

☐ Yes

☐ No

6. **Do you have policies and procedures to respond appropriately to disclosures of gender-based violence (including domestic and family violence and sexual harassment) and/or gender-based discrimination?**

☐ Yes

☐ No

If you answered 'no' to any of these questions, you would need to take action to address the gaps you have identified. Please have a look at the [Our Watch website](#) to view relevant resources (tipsheets, toolkits, webinars, videos and checklists) to help meet the readiness requirements.

You can contact the Our Watch Workplaces team at: equalityandrespect@ourwatch.org.au.



'Am I ready?' starter scan for Workplace Equality and Respect

HANDOUT

This tool will help you get started (or keep going) on building a workplace culture that's fair, respectful, and safe for everyone.

It offers a set of guiding questions to help you think through what needs to be in place before you begin building a more gender-equal and respectful workplace, one that actively works to prevent gender-based violence at work. It's designed especially for sole traders and small workplaces with fewer than 20 employees.

The first set of questions is designed to help you reflect on your workplace culture and everyday practices. It can be helpful to explore these with a few staff members (if you have any), or chat through them with peers or people in your network. That way, you get a mix of perspectives. The answers will give you a clearer picture of what might help drive positive change and where you might hit some bumps along the way. Knowing upfront what resistance you might face means you can plan and be ready to respond.

My workplace's culture and everyday practices

1. **How ready do I feel to integrate gender equality and respectful workplace principles into my day-to-day work, client interactions, and decision-making?**

- ☐ Very ready and committed
- ☐ Somewhat ready: I need more clarity or resources
- ☐ Not yet ready: I am unsure how to begin

2. **What concerns or challenges might I face when embedding gender equality or workplace gender-based violence prevention principles into my work? (Examples: limited time, lack of training, uncertainty about relevance to my business, fear of backlash, etc.)**

3. **What supports, knowledge, or tools would help me feel more confident leading by example on gender equality and respectful practices?**

- ☐ Access to practical guidelines or training
- ☐ Networking with like-minded practitioners
- ☐ Coaching or mentoring
- ☐ More time or funding
- ☐ Other:

4. **How do my clients, partners, or collaborators typically respond to conversations about gender equality or respectful workplace culture?**

- ☐ Highly supportive and engaged
- ☐ Mixed reactions: there is some interest, some resistance
- ☐ Little awareness or openness
- ☐ I'm not sure, I haven't explored this yet



5. What personal habits, assumptions, or comfort zones might make it difficult for me to model or promote gender equality and prevent gender-based violence in my work?

If you're not yet ready or feeling unsure, that's okay. Starting with curiosity and a willingness to learn is a strong first step. Focus on small, practical actions, seek out support or resources, and connect with others who are also learning.

Please have a look at the [Our Watch website](#) to view relevant resources (tipsheets, toolkits, webinars, videos and checklists) to help meet the readiness requirements.

You can contact the Our Watch Workplaces team at: equalityandrespect@ourwatch.org.au.

6. How prepared do I feel to respond appropriately and safely if a client, contractor, or colleague discloses an experience of gender-based violence or discrimination?

- ☐ Well prepared: I have clear steps and know where to refer for support
- ☐ Somewhat prepared: I would need more guidance or resources
- ☐ Not prepared: I don't know what the appropriate response would be
- ☐ Unsure



STEP 2

Look at the data

Gather information about your team and workplace culture. What's working? What's missing? Use that to decide what needs attention.

If you're working solo or managing a very small team, take a moment to reflect. Ask yourself these questions:

- How do I usually talk to and work with people? Am I showing respect and inclusion in the way I communicate?
- What am I doing well? Maybe you use inclusive language on your website, speak up when someone's being rude, or you've done training on sexual harassment.
- Where are the gaps? Perhaps you haven't written down your workplace's values, or your workspace isn't very accessible.
- What should I focus on next? It could be getting the people in leadership on board, updating your contracts, improving your online content, or setting clearer boundaries with clients.

This quick snapshot helps you figure out where you're at and where you want to go. You can also ask trusted peers or collaborators for honest feedback.

Alert!

In small workplaces, collecting staff feedback needs to be done in a way that feels genuinely safe and private. Surveys or group chats can make people feel exposed—especially when there are only a few women, Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander staff, or people with disabilities—and small numbers can unintentionally identify individuals. As a rule, avoid breaking feedback into demographic categories when there are ten or fewer responses, and report results only in aggregate. For workplaces with fewer than 19 staff, internally run surveys are not recommended due to the high risk of identifiability and data misuse; instead, build feedback into regular one-on-one conversations or use an external provider, independent interviews, or facilitated discussions. These approaches help people speak openly while protecting privacy and ensuring concerns can be raised safely.



STEP 3

Take action

Use what you've learned to create a plan based on real evidence that focuses on the areas that need change. You don't need a complicated strategy, just a few steps you're ready to commit to. Think of it as a working plan that fits your workplace and helps you stay on track.

Start with what you already know. Use what you learned in your earlier reflection (what's working, what's missing, and what needs attention) to set small and clear goals.

For example:

- **Short-term:**
'Make my website more accessible.'
- **Long-term:**
'Add a zero-tolerance statement to my contracts.'

Keep safety front and centre by making sure your actions help reduce the risk of harassment, discrimination, or unsafe behaviour.

Make it part of your everyday work by linking your actions to how you already run your organisation. This way, it becomes part of your normal routine rather than an extra task.

You can use the [Your playbook of actions](#) section as a starting point for building your plan of action. To help you prioritise the actions, you may want to use a two-step process.

Begin with a prioritisation grid (below) that maps actions to cost (cheap or expensive) and effort (easy or hard).

Example prioritisation grid

	Easy	Hard
Cheap	▪ Add a values-based statement to your email footer or website. ▪ Use inclusive language in contracts and communications. ▪ Display support contacts like 1800RESPECT on your website or materials.	▪ Create a one-page gender equality, safety, and respect action plan. ▪ Run annual risk assessments for psychosocial hazards. ▪ Record and respond to incidents confidentially.
Expensive	▪ Attend low-cost training on harassment, bias, or cultural safety. ▪ Partner with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander businesses via Supply Nation.	▪ Conduct an annual equity and accessibility review using tools like the CBM Gender and Disability Analysis Toolkit. ▪ Resource lived experience engagement meaningfully (e.g. paying contributors, adapting materials).



Prioritisation grid

[HANDOUT](#)

	Easy	Hard
Cheap		
Expensive		



Next, once you have plotted your actions in this grid, you can set yourself monthly goals. Use a simplified MoSCoW method:

- **Must do:** Top priority. These go straight into your final action plan.
- **Should do:** Important, but not critical. You'll include these actions in your plan as well but can phase in the implementation.
- **Could do:** Good ideas and will improve outcomes, but not essential right now.
- **Won't do (yet):** Not a priority now.

Track your progress using a simple traffic light system (see below example).

Once or twice a year, take a moment to reflect. What's working well? What could be better? Measure progress, share results, and keep making things better.

You're on your way

Workplaces are always evolving with new ways of working, emerging technologies, and changing laws. So, while these actions aren't exhaustive, they're a great starting point. By taking these steps and using the Workplace Equality and Respect Model, you're setting your organisation up to be safer, more inclusive, and more resilient. You'll also be helping to reduce risks linked to psychosocial hazards like sexual harassment and discrimination.

We encourage you to explore these tools – and the many other resources available on the [Our Watch Workplaces website](#) – to help build and maintain a workplace that's safe, equal, and respectful for everyone.

Example progress tracker

Action	Priority	Status
Add a values statement to your website or email footer	Must Do	COMPLETED
Run annual risk assessments	Should Do	IN PROGRESS
Pay contributors with lived experience for input	Could Do	IN PROGRESS
Hire external consultants for inclusion audits	Not Now	NOT STARTED



Progress tracker

[HANDOUT](#)

STATUS:

NOT STARTED

IN PROGRESS

COMPLETED

Action	Priority	Status



Your playbook of actions

As a sole trader or someone running a small business, or managing a small team, you have a positive duty to take reasonable steps to prevent work-related gender-based violence (including sexual harassment and other forms of sex discrimination) in your workplace. This applies to how you interact with clients, suppliers, contractors, collaborators and partners.

This playbook of actions brings together practical tips and insights from a variety of trusted and credible sources. You can explore these references, along with extra tools and resources to help you on your journey, in the section [Further reading](#).

Use the [Prioritisation Grid](#) and [Progress Tracker](#) to input the suggested actions from the following lists to plot out your workplace's action plan.





Key area: Strategy and planning

Think of this as the foundation. It's about weaving the values of gender equality, safety, and respect into your strategic planning and decision-making from the start, not just adding it on later.

START

Set the baseline (plans, policies, standards)

Know and meet your legal responsibilities

You've got a legal responsibility to take proactive steps to prevent gender-based violence, not just respond when something goes wrong. Here are some ways to make sure your work environment (in-person or online) doesn't create risks to someone's mental health, wellbeing, or safety:

- Know your legal obligations, including the positive duty under Respect@Work changes to the Sex Discrimination Act 1984 and anti-discrimination legislations.
- Stay across WHS requirements, including how to manage psychosocial risks like bullying, stress, isolation, and unsafe power dynamics.
- Integrate psychosocial risk management into your WHS systems covering physical and digital safety, contractor and client interactions, and clear, accessible reporting pathways.

- Update your risk management systems to include psychosocial hazards and reporting pathways.
- Understand what's required for paid family and domestic violence leave. From mid-2025, all affected employees, including casuals, will be entitled to 10 days of paid leave upfront. Check the [Fair Work Ombudsman](#) for details.

Create your foundation documents

This could be a code of conduct or similar document that suits your workplace. Use plain language, make it visible, and keep it simple—one page is often enough. Include the following in your foundation document:

- Expectations around respectful behaviour, discrimination, and mental wellbeing.
- What's OK and what's not.
- How to raise concerns (directly, via email, or external channels).
- How you'll respond to concerns and what happens next.

Invest in building capability

Build your workplace's capability to support gender equality, safety, and respect by taking the following steps:

- Include short check-ins about respect, fairness, and safety in team or client discussions.
- Join free or low-cost training on responding to harassment, bullying, bias, and racism.
- Review policies and practices for hidden bias and exclusion (for example, gender, race, disability, age, sexuality).

Respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural protocols

- Learn about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural protocols and follow those relevant to your local area and community.



Why these actions matter

A safe, respectful workplace builds trust, reduces turnover, and strengthens your reputation with clients and your community.

You also have a **legal responsibility** to take proactive steps to prevent gender-based violence, discrimination, and harassment—not just react when something goes wrong. That means making sure your work environment, whether in-person or online, doesn't create risks to anyone's mental health, wellbeing, or safety.

By putting clear expectations, fair systems, and regular learning in place, no matter how small your workplace is, you're showing leadership. It helps protect you, the people you work with, and the people you serve. Most importantly, it creates a foundation for long-term success through a workplace culture built on a gender equality, safety, and respect.

MOVE TO

Signal values and extend beyond employees

Create a short values-based statement on gender equality, safety, and respect

For example: 'I treat everyone with respect and don't accept harassment, bullying, or discrimination.' Share it openly on your website, email footer, contracts, or when onboarding clients or collaborators.

Build a one-page gender equality, safety, and respect action plan

Set out your key goals (for example, respectful communication, fair opportunities, safe client interactions).

Integrate fairness into your decisions

Use inclusive language in job ads and contracts, reflecting diverse backgrounds and experiences in your team or partnerships. Include recognition and reward for respectful leadership in job descriptions (even your own).

GO FURTHER

Formalise, resource, and influence

Be transparent about progress

Record what's working, reflect, and share improvements in team catch-ups or online.

Collaborate with others

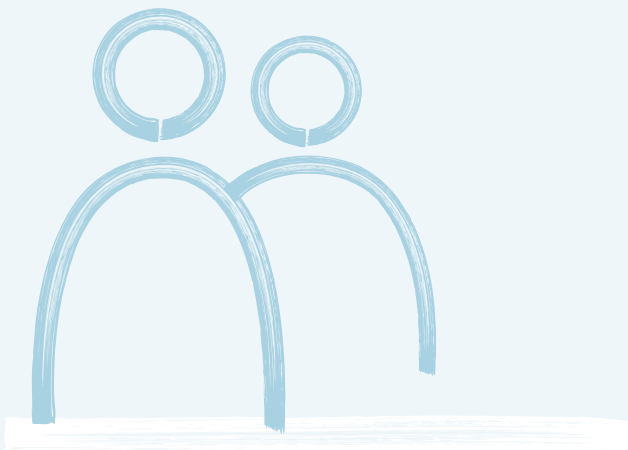
Partner with suppliers, networks, or local businesses to promote safe, respectful practices.

Review and refresh your one-page plan annually

Set new goals as your workplace grows.

Stay informed

Be clear on your legal and ethical responsibilities as your workplace grows.



Key area: Workplace culture

Culture is what people feel and experience every day at work. It's shaped by leadership, systems, and behaviours. Create an environment where the promotion of gender equality, safety, and respect is clearly expected, consistently modelled by leaders, and backed up by policies, training, and accountability at every level.

START

Make respectful behaviour a daily habit

Talk about gender equality, safety, and respect

You can do this in everyday interactions, during catch-ups, client meetings, or when briefing new contractors.

Make respect visible

Display your values statement and code of conduct (see the Strategy: Start) in shared spaces, websites, or client materials.

Use inclusive language

Use gender-neutral terms ('team' not 'guys'), people's correct pronouns, and imagery that reflects diversity.

Model wellbeing and flexibility

Show balance and care in how you manage your time and relationships.

Foster trust and safety

Encourage open conversations about concerns and make it clear harmful behaviour isn't tolerated.

Practice cultural respect

Acknowledge Country, recognise diverse communities, and celebrate cultural events.

Why these actions matter

In a small workplace, your behaviour sets the standard. Every action, including the way you speak, listen, and respond, shapes the culture around you. When you promote gender equality, safety, and respect through everyday decisions, it sends a powerful message: this is how we do business here.

These actions build more than just compliance, they build trust, loyalty, and credibility. Clients notice, contractors feel valued, and your workplace becomes a place where people want to work and collaborate.

By showing your values in visible, practical ways, you're not only meeting your legal and ethical responsibilities, you're also helping create a safer, more respectful community. That's leadership in action, and it starts with you.



MOVE TO

Consistency, participation, shared ownership**Make diversity visible**

Show real people and stories from your community on your website and in your marketing.

Have a respectful behaviour clause

Include expectations on respectful behaviour in contracts and service agreements.

Handle complaints with empathy and confidentiality

See 'Start' under the 'Everyday operations' section of this document for more information.

Ensure events and training are inclusive

Prioritise accessible venues, quiet areas, alcohol-free options and diverse catering.

Make it everyone's responsibility

Encourage everyone you work with to contribute to gender equality, safety, and respect.



GO FURTHER

Transparency, partnership, and shared accountability**Take feedback seriously**

Identify patterns or issues raised and take practical steps to address them. This might mean adjusting a process, clarifying expectations, or improving communication. Let people know how their feedback made a difference. Share updates in team chats, emails, or meetings.

Mentor or amplify diverse voices in your industry

Use your platform to highlight underrepresented voices. Share articles, interviews, or insights from diverse professionals in your newsletters or social media. Offer mentorship or collaboration opportunities to people from different backgrounds.

Learn from lived experience of diversity

Make time to engage with stories and perspectives different from your own. Read books and articles, listen to podcasts, attend community events, or follow diverse voices online.

Speak up when it's safe

Use your influence to challenge disrespect or bias when you see it. This could be in a client meeting, a networking event, or online.



Key area: Everyday operations

This is about putting gender equality, respect and safety into action—across everything you do. Gender equality, respect, and inclusion should show up in everything you do—from how you deliver services and choose suppliers to how your teams work and make decisions.

START

Put the core systems in place

Look at official guidance

Check Safe Work Australia's [guidance](#) for sole traders and small businesses on managing psychosocial risks and preventing further harm.

Maintain a risk register

Include gender-based violence and psychosocial hazards such as bullying and harassment.

Run annual risk assessments

Consider things like client meetings, remote work, late-night shifts, or alcohol at events.

Redesign unsafe situations

Use buddy systems, safe transport, and client clauses.

Keep communication professional

Use workplace channels, safe venues, and appropriate times.

Record and respond to incidents

Know which authorities to contact for serious issues.

Provide information and support contacts

Make reporting information and support contacts clear and easy to find. Include services like 1800RESPECT, WHS regulators, Australian Human Rights Commission, and police. Display this information somewhere easy to find, like your code of conduct, onboarding materials, or on your website.

Keep confidential notes

Any concerns or incidents so be recorded confidentially so you can identify patterns early.

Make providing feedback straightforward

Create simple, safe ways for clients or collaborators to give feedback, including anonymous options.

Why these actions matter

Taking these steps helps prevent harm before it happens and protects you, the people you work with, and your workplace. Gender-based violence, bullying, and harassment are not just interpersonal issues, they're recognised workplace health and safety risks.

By identifying these risks early, keeping clear boundaries, and making support easy to find, you show that respect and safety are part of how you do business. Recording and reviewing incidents helps you spot patterns, fix problems quickly, and demonstrate that you take your duty of care seriously.

Even for small or one-person operations, these actions build trust, professionalism, and accountability, and they send a strong message that everyone deserves to work in an environment that promotes gender equality, safety, and respect.



MOVE TO

Strengthen, co-design, and expand scope

Keep communication open and visible

Talk about gender equality, safety, and respect regularly, even in short team or client check-ins. Share progress or small wins to show that feedback leads to real action.

Review your practices and partnerships

Work with clients, suppliers, and collaborators who align with your values. Choose partners who demonstrate gender equality, safety, and respect, rather than just talking about it. You can find endorsed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander businesses through [Supply Nation](#) or similar networks.

Embed accessibility and inclusion where it counts

Make your online and physical workspace easy to access for everyone. Use photos, graphics, and examples in your materials that reflect the diversity of your community and clients. Invite feedback from people with lived experience of exclusion, such as racial, gender, disability, or cultural marginalisation, to uncover gaps in awareness and strengthen inclusion practices. Resource this process meaningfully, ensuring participants are supported and their insights are valued. Communicate openly about what is learned, including what changes will and won't be made, to build trust and accountability.

Set clear expectations in writing

Include a short clause in your contracts or service agreements that outlines respectful and safe behaviour for you, your clients, and your partners. This protects your workplace and helps prevent misunderstandings before they happen.

GO FURTHER

Integrate, publish, and lead

Provide a simple, private way to raise concerns

Have a dedicated confidential email address or online form so clients, contractors, or collaborators can share concerns safely. Emphasise that your workplace takes all issues seriously and will respond respectfully.

Review your physical and online spaces for safety and accessibility

Check that your workspace, website, and materials are easy to access and inclusive. Consider things like clear walkways, readable text, and respectful, inclusive design. Add *alt text* for website images and keep language clear and easy to understand.

Provide key information in multiple formats

Consider multilingual versions or alternate formats like audio or video, particularly when your client base is diverse, or you work across communities.

Strengthen digital safety

Know which communication tools you and your staff use and make sure settings like privacy, message deletion and access are appropriate. Set clear expectations for respectful online behaviour and explain what to do if something feels unsafe or inappropriate. Keep reporting simple—staff should know they can come to you directly and confidentially with any concerns. Before introducing a new tool or app, take a moment to check its privacy and safety settings, and review your digital practices every so often to make sure they're still working well.



Partner with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander businesses

You can also buy from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-owned businesses (through Supply Nation). This is great for values-based networking as your workplace grows.

Maintain an annual equity and accessibility review

Use tools like the CBM Gender and Disability Analysis Toolkit, which is helpful when you have established systems or staff.

Plan ahead for resistance or pushback

Be ready with calm, confident responses if someone questions your approach to gender equality, safety or respect. Keep a short, written statement of your commitment so you can refer to it.



PART 3

Further reading

Our Watch

[Workplace Equality and Respect](#)

[Taking an intersectional approach](#)

[Creating safe-to-speak cultures](#)

[Toolkit for Managing Resistance and Mitigating Risk in Workplace Equality and Respect Initiatives](#)

[Toolkit: Engaging leaders to prevent gender-based violence in the workplace](#)

[Bystander action](#)

[Learning briefs: Engaging employers in preventing workplace sexual harassment](#)

[Toolkit: Communicating safety, gender equality and respect in the workplace](#)

[Addressing customer and client-perpetrated sexual harassment](#)

[Creating safe, equal and respectful workplaces for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women: A beginners guide](#)

[Creating safety, equality, inclusion and respect for women with disabilities in the workplace: A guide](#)

[Am I ready? starter scan](#)

[Fact sheet: Great practice in collecting and analysing diversity data](#)

[FAQs: Collecting and analysing data](#)

[Tip sheet: Designing workplace equality and respect surveys](#)

[Tip sheet: Running employee focus groups](#)





Australian Human Rights Commission

[Guidelines for complying with the positive duty](#)

[Information guide on the positive duty](#)

[A resource for small business on the positive duty](#)

[Fact sheets and other resources](#)

[Speaking from experience: What needs to change to address workplace sexual harassment](#)

[Workplace sexual harassment resources](#)

Australian Institute of Company Directors

[Positive duty to prevent workplace sexual harassment — a director's guide](#)

Champions of Change Coalition

[FOCUSED on everyday respect](#)

[7 switches: A guide for inclusive gender equality by design](#)

[Power to create inclusive gender equality in the workplace](#)

[In the eye of the beholder: Avoiding the merit trap](#)

[Building confidence and trust in workplace responses to sexual harassment](#)

[Sexual harassment](#)

Safe Work Australia

[Model Code of Practice: Sexual and gender-based harassment](#)

[Resources on workplace sexual harassment](#)

Fair Work Commission

[Family and domestic violence leave](#)

Pride in Diversity

[Australian Workplace Equality Index](#)

Rainbow Health Australia

[Pride in Prevention Evidence Guide](#)

Workplace Gender Equality Agency

[Action Planning Playbook](#)

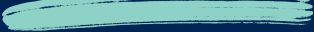
[Action Planning Tool](#)

Endnotes

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- 2 Our Watch. (2021). Change the Story: A Shared Framework for the Primary Prevention of Violence Against Women in Australia (2nd ed.). <https://www.ourwatch.org.au/change-the-story/change-the-story-framework>
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- 5 Novacek, Gabrielle. (2024). An Inclusive Workplace Is Good for Business, Boston Consulting Group <https://www.bcg.com/publications/2024/an-inclusive-workplace-is-good-for-business>
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- 9 Gutiérrez, D., Castaño, A. (2021). Gender Equality in the Workplace: Key Driver of Wellbeing, Business Performance and Sustainability. *Aligning Perspectives in Gender Mainstreaming. Aligning Perspectives on Health, Safety and Wellbeing*.
- 10 Novacek, Gabrielle. (2024), see note 5.

ourwatch.org.au

**Our
Watch**



Preventing violence
against women