Workplace technology-facilitated sexual harassment:

Perpetration, responses and prevention

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AUSTRALIA'S NATIONAL RESEARCH ORGANISATION FOR WOMEN'S SAFETY

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ANROWS acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land across Australia on which we work and live. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders past and present, and we value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and knowledge. We are committed to standing and working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, honouring the truths set out in the Warawarni-gu Guma Statement.

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Perpetration, responses and prevention

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This report addresses work covered in the ANROWS research project "Technology-facilitated sexual harassment in the workplace: Perpetration, responses and prevention". Please consult the ANROWS website for more information on the project.

ANROWS research contributes to the vision of the *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032*: ending violence in one generation. This research addresses the Prevention domain – stopping violence before it starts, and the Response domain – efforts to address existing violence.

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Acknowledgement of lived experiences of violence

ANROWS acknowledges the lives and experiences of the women and children affected by domestic, family and sexual violence who are represented in this report. We recognise the individual stories of courage, hope and resilience that form the basis of ANROWS research.

Caution: Some people may find parts of this content confronting or distressing. Recommended support services include: 1800RESPECT (1800 737 732) and Lifeline (13 11 14).

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Acronyms and abbreviations

ACT	Australian Capital Territory
AHRC	Australian Human Rights Commission
AI	Artificial Intelligence
GEAS	Gender Equality Attitudes Scale
HR	Human resources
ISHMA	Illinois Sexual Harassment Myth Acceptance
LGBTQ	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and gender diverse, queer and questioning
LOTE	Languages other than English
NCAS	National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey
NSW	New South Wales
PAG	Project Advisory Group
Qld	Queensland
SA	South Australia
Tas	Tasmania
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
VAGO	Victorian Auditor-General's Office
Vic	Victoria
WA	Western Australia
WGEA	Workplace Gender Equality Agency
WTFSH	Workplace technology-facilitated sexual harassment

Executive summary

Project background

Workplace technology-facilitated sexual harassment (WTFSH) involves unwelcome and/or threatening sexual conduct using mobile, online and other digital technologies in a workplace context. It can include a wide range of behaviours including unwelcome sexual advances, comments and jokes, sexual requests, relational pursuit (including monitoring or stalking behaviours), threats of physical violence such as rape, sexually explicit and abusive communications, and non-consensually taking, sharing or threatening to share, nude or sexual images, all within and beyond the physical location of the workplace, and during or after business (working) hours (Australian Human Rights Commission [AHRC], 2020, p. 77). WTFSH can be perpetrated by co-workers, contractors, suppliers, customers and clients, and by general community members, for example, engaging in WTFSH behaviours towards a public or high-profile figure due to their work (e.g. journalists, academics and politicians).

The Australian Government has committed to implementing all 55 recommendations of the *Respect@Work: National Inquiry into Sexual Harassment in Australian Workplaces* report and changes to implement the report are underway. However, we note that the Government is nearing completion of nearly all *Respect@Work* report recommendations, and work to implement remaining recommendations continues to progress as a key priority. As a result, individual organisations and businesses play an increasing role in addressing workplace sexual harassment and operationalising these changes.

Sexual harassment in Australian workplaces has been found to be widespread and pervasive, with a 2018 survey revealing that 1 in 3 people experienced sexual harassment at work in the past 5 years (AHRC, 2020). The global #MeToo movement has also shone a light on the nature and extent of sexual harassment within workplaces (Kearl, 2018). Consequently, the issue has been identified as a national priority for policymakers, regulators and employers in Australia. A National Inquiry was launched by Australia's Sex Discrimination Commissioner and Minister for Women in 2018 and its findings and 55 recommendations were presented in the 2020 *Respect@Work* report (AHRC). The Australian Government accepted and committed to delivering all 55 recommendations in the report, including the introduction of a new legal obligation, referred to as a "positive duty" (through an amendment to the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* [Cth]), which legally requires all Australian employers and persons conducting a business or undertaking to eliminate workplace sex discrimination and harassment.[1] The positive duty commenced in December 2022 and the fact that individual organisations and businesses are now playing an increasing role in addressing workplace sexual harassment and operationalising these changes is important impetus and context for this research.

While much is known about the extent of sexual harassment victimisation, there has been little research on WTFSH specifically. The limited available literature indicates that WTFSH is prevalent and growing, with young people and women particularly at risk of victimisation (AHRC, 2022; Adams et al., 2019). What is notably lacking in Australian research and policy is knowledge of the behaviours, characteristics and specific drivers of WTFSH perpetration and how industry (employers, technology platforms and government) might better prevent, detect and respond to WTFSH, especially given the increasingly digital nature of workplaces and workplace communications in a post-pandemic environment. This project responds directly to these substantial research and policy gaps and is the first mixed methods study to examine WTFSH in Australia.

[1] It should also be noted that Australia's model Work Health and Safety Regulations were amended in May 2022 to include regulations specifically on psychosocial hazards (i.e. all risks that may cause physical and/or psychological harm). Therefore, all employers and persons conducting a business or undertaking also have a concurrent positive duty to prevent sexual harassment under work health and safety laws. These amendments make clear that employers have a positive duty to do everything they reasonably can to prevent exposure to psychosocial hazards and risks, including sexual harassment (see Safe Work Australia, 2022).

Aims and questions

Aims

1) To identify the nature and drivers of WTFSH.
2) To examine industry (employer representatives, technology providers, regulators and workplace and online safety experts) strategies to prevent, detect and respond to WTFSH.
3) To produce evidence-based, policy-relevant recommendations that could inform responses, and practice innovation, and prevent WTFSH.

Questions

1) What are the specific drivers of WTFSH, and how are these similar to, and different from, drivers of other forms of violence against women?
2) What behaviours, characteristics and trends can be observed in the perpetration of WTFSH?
3) How can industry (employers, technology platforms and government) better prevent, detect and respond to WTFSH?

Method

Stage 1

20 in-depth interviews were conducted with industry stakeholders, including employer representatives, technology providers, regulators and workplace and online safety experts exploring the prevalence, context, characteristics and complexities of WTFSH (n = 20).

Stage 2

A national survey was run with Australian adults aged 18 to 65 years, who have participated in paid or voluntary work in the last 15 years, exploring their engagement in the perpetration of WTFSH (n = 3,345).

Stage 3

Five online focus-group discussions were conducted with young adults aged 18 to 39 years using WTFSH scenarios to prompt discussion around what constitutes WTFSH, the complexities of identifying and preventing WTFSH and gaps in current laws, policies, tools, responses and support avenues relating to the detection, punishment and prevention of WTFSH (n = 28).

The research team convened a project advisory group (PAG) to bring together the perspectives of researchers, practitioners, advocates and policymakers from relevant government, non-government and digital technology companies (for Project Advisory Board Members, see Appendix B). The PAG members provided feedback and advice on the project design, methods and findings at scheduled meetings and via email.

Key findings

Stage 1

The interviews revealed high levels of concern regarding the prevalence of WTFSH and the need for guidance to help employers address and ultimately prevent it. Employer representatives' concerns were particularly acute in light of the introduction of the new legal obligation or "positive duty", which legally requires all Australian employers and persons conducting a business or undertaking to eliminate workplace sex discrimination and harassment. Participants identified a wide range of behaviours that can constitute WTFSH, from paying someone too much attention or sending overly personal messages, including outside of business hours, to behaviours involving social media pile-ons and rape threats.

On prevalence:

- Participants believed the frequency of WTFSH is increasing and is more likely to occur in some industries than others, for example, massage therapy, sex work, media, mining, politics and law.
- There were mixed views about whether the COVID-19 pandemic had increased the occurrence of WTFSH. Still, most agreed that employers were unprepared for issues related to the move to online working and working from home contexts. This lack of foresight included what the shift "out of the office" would mean for digital communications and inappropriate behaviour and the ways technology can facilitate or make it easier to "step over the line" due to the less formal communication channels it encompasses, for example, workplace WhatsApp groups.
- Despite improved awareness of workplace sexual harassment more broadly, participants felt reporting data was unlikely to reflect the true extent of WTFSH due to a lack of understanding of technology-facilitated abuse as a form of workplace sexual harassment, fear of retribution for reporting, self-blame and a lack of knowledge of where to seek support.

Drivers, harms and characteristics:

- Participants believed the drivers or causes of WTFSH reflect the drivers of other forms of violence against women, such as gender inequality, misogyny, gendered stereotypes, power imbalances, poor workplace culture and leadership.
- The omnipresent and boundaryless nature of WTFSH was a recurring theme.
- Participants identified a range of potential perpetrator characteristics, including:
  - being men
  - a sense of entitlement and not recognising or caring about boundaries
  - having various relationship contexts with victims and survivors, such as co-workers, bosses, clients, customers, competitors, viewers, readers or listeners, and constituents
  - being members of organised campaigns against groups – such as sex workers, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples or LGBTQ people – established to silence groups or individuals through harassment.
- Participants felt that victims and survivors were most likely to be young, women, employed in male-dominated workplaces, and lacking power.
- Participants identified WTFSH as harmful and noted that victims and survivors might experience emotional and psychological damage, anxiety and self-harm, compromised reputations, careers and income, and feel silenced. Many participants discussed the "chilling effect" of WTFSH, which can drive women, in particular, out of public spaces, such as social and news media. Participants also acknowledged that the harm caused by WTFSH can be minimised by others, including employers, due to a perception that digital harassment is less serious than physical forms of harassment.

Approaches for improving responses to WTFSH:

- Improving responses to WTFSH can include increased education and improved awareness of WTFSH across all levels of organisations. Most participants felt that employers should provide WTFSH education and training as part of broader programs regarding sexual harassment and workplace bullying. Participants recommended including specific case studies regarding WTFSH to help people understand the range of behaviours that can constitute this form of harassment and scenarios to role-play and help improve bystander responses.
- While recognising that employers have primary responsibility for addressing WTFSH, participants identified that governments should provide mandated requirements and guidance on WTFSH policies, training and responses to help employers appropriately investigate reports, provide trauma-informed support to victims and survivors, hold perpetrators accountable and ensure appropriate responses or penalties. Participants felt that sanctions and guidelines were essential to ensure employers prioritise WTFSH.

Stage 2

The survey identified some clear trends regarding the perpetration of WTFSH. Of the 3,345 Australian adults surveyed:

- **1 in 4** (24.8%, *n* = 830) reported ever having engaged in any workplace sexual harassment behaviour, whether via technology or in person.
- **1 in 3 men** (33.5%, *n* = 526) reported *ever* engaging in *any* workplace sexual harassment behaviour, as compared to **1 in 6 women** (17.1%, *n* = 304).
- **1 in 7** (14.9%, *n* = 498) respondents had engaged in WTFSH, while **1 in 5** (22.7%, *n* = 759) had engaged in face-to-face or in-person workplace sexual harassment behaviours.
- **1 in 8** (12.8%, *n* = 427) had ever engaged in *both* technology and in-person workplace sexual harassment.
- More than **1 in 4** of those who had engaged in WTFSH had repeatedly done so towards the same person (30.1%, *n* = 149), while a majority said it was a "one-off" (60.6%, *n* = 300).
- Among those who had engaged in WTFSH, it was more common for their workplace to be a large (42.6%, *n* = 212) or mid-sized organisation (31.5%, *n* = 157) rather than a smaller workplace (25.7%, *n* = 128).

There were clear gendered patterns:

- Men were **significantly more** likely than women to report engaging in face-to-face sexual harassment (men: 31.0%, *n* = 486; women: 15.4%, *n* = 273).
- Men were **significantly more** likely than women to report engaging in WTFSH (men: 23.9%, *n* = 375; women: 6.9%, *n* = 123).
- Men were **significantly more** likely than women to report engaging in *both* WTFSH and in-person workplace sexual harassment (men: 1 in 10, 10.0%, *n* = 335; women: 1 in 34, 2.8%, *n* = 92).
- It was most common for the workplace gender composition to be **male-dominated** (44.9%, *n* = 220) or to have roughly equal numbers of men and women (38.6%, *n* = 189) rather than a woman-dominated workplace (16.3%, *n* = 80).

The most significant indicator of WTFSH perpetration related to the attitudes held by the perpetrator:

- Those respondents with a high endorsement of sexist and gender-discriminatory attitudes were over **15 times** more likely to report engagement in WTFSH than those with low endorsement of these attitudes.
- Those respondents with a high endorsement of sexual harassment myths were almost **five times** more likely to report engaging in WTFSH than those with low endorsement of these myths.

With regard to motivations for the behaviour and perceptions of how the behaviour would be viewed and experienced by the victim and survivor, we identified the following patterns:

- Just over half of the respondents who identified that they had engaged in a technology-facilitated sexually harassing behaviour in the workplace (51.5%, *n* = 256) said that they "thought the person was okay with it" in their most recent incident.

- Among the other most common responses were that the perpetrator "thought the person would be flattered" (44.6%, *n* = 222), that they "thought it was funny" (42.0%, *n* = 209), or that they "wanted to pursue a sexual or other personal relationship with them" (40.8%, *n* = 203).
- More than **1 in 4** (30.3%, *n* = 151) of those who had engaged in WTFSH said they had wanted to "frighten" the victim and survivor.
- More than **1 in 4** (30.3%, *n* = 151) had wanted to "humiliate" the victim and survivor.
- More than **1 in 4** (30.5%, *n* = 152) had wanted to "express their anger" towards the victim and survivor.

Finally, in terms of outcomes, of the **1 in 7** (*n* = 498) respondents who had disclosed engaging in WTFSH, **less than half** (38.6%, *n* = 192) said that a formal report or complaint had been made against them for such behaviours, highlighting potential gaps in appropriate internal and external responses to WTFSH.

Stage 3

The focus groups with young adults aged 18 to 39 years highlighted the complexities of WTFSH and an absence of knowledge of policies and supports to address, prevent and respond to it. There were several key findings:

- Employers and governments have been slow to respond to the changing working culture and environment in a post-pandemic context. Policies and supports have not kept pace with changes to how, where and when people work, as well as shifts in the ways that people use and communicate with colleagues (and clients) across a range of digital technologies. Technological developments can create blurred boundaries as to what constitutes professional and unprofessional conduct when using digital technologies and facilitate an environment where WTFSH is not only possible but probable.
- A clear definition of what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate behaviour concerning work contexts and digital technologies is needed. Workplace policies on sexual harassment – both internal and government regulations/mandated requirements – should specifically mention WTFSH. Cultural change regarding appropriate and inappropriate conduct on digital technologies in the work context is needed. Cultural change needs to start at the top with leadership, which can be further strengthened with training and policies that engage with relatable case studies and scenarios.
- Shared workplace technologies are being used to perpetrate WTFSH. There is a pressing need to focus on "safety by design" (i.e. anticipating, detecting and eliminating harms before they occur by factoring safety into the design of any technology) in the development of workplace technologies (e.g. shared calendars) and include these considerations within workplace policies to reiterate a culture of what is and is not appropriate or acceptable workplace conduct.

Implications for policy and practice

A combination of actions is required to address WTFSH across employers, technology providers, and government policy and legislation:

- Greater awareness and clarity of what constitutes WTFSH both within workplaces and, more broadly, in the general community. This should include a consistent, robust, evidence-based definition that can be used within workplaces and in government law and mandated requirements, developed in plain English for all industries (employers, technology platforms and government).
- Improved clarity around internal workplace policies for preventing and responding to WTFSH, including outcomes for perpetrators, aligned with the new legal positive duty on employers and persons conducting business (Respect@Work, 2023). This includes having a basic standard for preventing and responding to WTFSH for all employers mandated in government law and requirements in plain English (and, where relevant, translated into multiple languages).
- Safety by design is considered in the development of digital technologies and platforms for workplace purposes and consideration of establishing a workplace-focused stream within the Office of the eSafety Commissioner that targets and engages providers of workplace technologies, for example,

through presentations or training that builds safety-by-design awareness, broader awareness of online safety and potential harms that can occur, and how they can improve their products through a safety lens.

- Use of automated and other technology-based AI tools to detect and intervene in potential harassing communications on workplace digital platforms, in conjunction with human moderation.
- Improved reporting mechanisms for bystanders, and victims and survivors, both within workplaces and communities, more broadly, with the potential for anonymous, non-compulsory reporting options (such as those used for sexual assault reports).
- Improved workplace cultures that proactively prevent sexual harassment and promote equity and respect, including through leadership that sets the standard and identifies sexual harassment as a business priority and through improved training around WTFSH, including specific case studies and bystander scenarios.
- Consideration by the Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) of publicly releasing employer-level data (already collected from all private and Commonwealth public sector employers that employ 100 or more employees in total) on elements included in employers' Respect@Work strategies. This would include the existence of formal policies or strategies, grievance processes and training for all employees and managers. We further suggest expanding the current questionnaire to include the number of reported incidents of sexual harassment and the number of investigations undertaken. This expansion would add to the world-class data collected by the WGEA and enable victims and survivors and others to see that action has been taken (and, by extension, will be taken) while not breaching confidentiality.
- Exploration of evidence-based best practice responses to WTFSH perpetration and the changing nature of the workplace in a post-pandemic context to assist with the development of plain English government guidelines that can be adapted across all industries to prevent WTFSH.

Conclusion

This report provides a summary of the findings of 20 in-depth qualitative interviews with industry stakeholders (including employer representatives, technology providers, regulators and workplace and online safety experts), a survey of Australian adults' (18 to 65 years, who have participated in paid or voluntary work within the last 15 years) engagement in the perpetration of WTFSH (n = 3,345) and five online focus groups with 28 young adults (18 to 39 years) on WTFSH. It reports on the drivers of WTFSH, as well as the behaviours, characteristics and trends that can be observed in the perpetration of WTFSH in Australia. It also identifies problems in defining WTFSH and challenges in preventing and responding to WTFSH, particularly in a post-pandemic context where the nature, location and mode of workplaces and workplace communication have changed substantially, while industry (employer, technology platforms and government) responses have not kept pace.

There is a clear opportunity in the current climate, where the Australian Government has almost completed the implementation of all 55 recommendations from the *Respect@Work* report (AHRC, 2020), and work to implement the remaining recommendations continues to progress as a priority, to consider and implement the recommendations outlined in this report, as part of the broader changes underway. The time for action is now.

Introduction

Workplace technology-facilitated sexual harassment (WTFSH) is unwelcome and/or threatening sexual conduct using mobile, online and other digital technologies within a workplace context. Examples of WTFSH may include unwelcome sexual advances, comments and jokes, sexual requests, relational pursuit (including monitoring or stalking behaviours), threats of physical violence such as rape, sexually explicit and abusive communications, and non-consensually taking, sharing or threatening to share, nude or sexual images, all within and beyond the physical location of the workplace, and during or after business (working) hours (AHRC, 2020, p. 77). WTFSH can be perpetrated by co-workers, contractors, suppliers, customers and clients, and by general community members, for example, engaging in WTFSH behaviours towards a public or high-profile figure due to their work (e.g. journalists, academics and politicians). In Australia, WTFSH may constitute criminal conduct (*Criminal Code Act 1995* [Cth] s474.17) or unlawful conduct (e.g. *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* [Cth]), but in some instances, victims and survivors may be unable to access legal responses, for example, if the WTFSH is perpetrated by persons who can obscure their identities online or due to reluctance for workplaces to pursue investigations for one-off conduct or to treat WTFSH as a "serious" harm. These factors also dissuade people from reporting WTFSH as a victim and survivor or bystander.

There has been little research specifically on WTFSH, but the available research indicates that it is prevalent and growing, with young people particularly at risk. A 2020 sexual harassment study from the United Kingdom of people over 16 years of age (n = 12,131) found that 29 per cent of respondents had experienced at least one form of sexual harassment in the workplace or work-related environment in the last 12 months (Adams et al., 2019, p. 8). Overall, 5 per cent of those in employment that experienced sexual harassment in the workplace, experienced it online or via work-related messaging (Adams et al., 2019, p. 73). Young people (aged 16–24 years) were significantly more likely than those aged 50 and over to be employed in the type of roles that reported the highest rates of workplace sexual harassment (i.e. as interns, in casual work, or working part-time; Adams et al., 2019, p. 71). *Everyone's Business: Fourth National Survey on Sexual Harassment in Australian Workplaces,* the Australian Human Rights Commission's (AHRC) fourth national survey of people aged 15 years and over (n = 10,272) on sexual harassment in Australian workplaces, found that rates of workplace sexual harassment had increased significantly since the previous survey was conducted in 2012 and that people aged 18 to 29 or 30 to 39 years (45% and 37% respectively) were more likely than those in other age groups to have been sexually harassed in the workplace in the past 5 years (2018, p. 27). Similarly, the fifth national survey in 2022, *Time for Respect: Fifth National Survey on Sexual Harassment in Australian Workplaces* (n = 10,157), found young people aged 15 to 17, 18 to 29 years, and 30 to 39 years (47%,[2] 46% and 39% respectively) were more likely than those in other age groups to have been sexually harassed in the workplace in the last 5 years (AHRC, 2022, p. 51). In the 2018 survey, 1 in 20 (4%) people had experienced sexual harassment occurring online or via some form of technology in a work-related context in the last 5 years (AHRC, 2018, p. 40); again people aged 18 to 29 years (8%) were more than twice as likely to report having experienced WTFSH than those aged 40 to 49 years (4%) and 50 to 64 years (3%; AHRC, 2018, p. 40).[3] In terms of gendered patterns, while the 2018 AHRC survey found that almost 1 in 3 women and 1 in 5 men had been sexually harassed online or via some form of technology (AHRC, 2018, p. 21), the 2022 survey found that women were equally as likely as men to have experienced WTFSH (AHRC, 2022, p. 75). The 2018 AHRC survey also revealed that women (54%) were more likely than men (43%) to say that they had been sexually harassed in the same workplace more than once (AHRC,

[2] Note this is based on a small sample size, n < 50.
[3] Note that the 2022 AHRC report did not include a breakdown of WTFSH by age.

2018, p. 42). In submissions made to the *Respect@Work* Inquiry, it was highlighted that "workers, especially women in industries for whom online spaces constitute a workplace, are experiencing [TFSH at] increasingly high levels" (AHRC, 2020, p. 132). While increases in WTFSH prevalence rates may be a positive sign of increased awareness of the nature and unacceptability of these behaviours, it is important to acknowledge that there is a significant gap between the prevalence data and reporting data, with fewer than 1 in 5 people (18%) who experienced workplace sexual harassment in the last 5 years making a formal report or complaint about the harassment (AHRC, 2022, p. 8). In response to this gap, the former Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Kate Jenkins, recommended a shift from a reactive model, which requires complaints from individuals, to Australia's new proactive model, which requires positive actions from employers (AHRC, 2022, p. 9). What is notably lacking in Australian and international research and policy is knowledge of the behaviours, characteristics and specific drivers of WTFSH perpetration and how industry (employers, technology platforms and government) might better prevent, detect and respond to WTFSH, especially given the increasingly digital nature of workplaces and workplace communications in the post-pandemic environment. This project responds directly to these substantial research and policy gaps.

Project aims and questions

This research examines WTFSH, specifically focusing on perpetration and pressing policy gaps. The project has three primary aims:

1) To identify the nature and drivers of WTFSH.

2) To examine industry (employer representatives, technology providers, regulators and workplace and online safety experts) strategies to prevent, detect and respond to WTFSH.

3) To produce evidence-based, policy-relevant recommendations that could inform responses, practice innovation, and prevent WTFSH.

In addressing these aims, the project responds to three research questions:

1) What are the specific drivers of WTFSH, and how are these similar to, and different from, drivers of other forms of violence against women?

2) What behaviours, characteristics and trends can be observed in the perpetration of WTFSH?

3) How can industry (employers, technology platforms and government) better prevent, detect and respond to WTFSH?

The literature

There is a range of inconsistent terminology used in the academic literature and public policy worldwide to describe technology-facilitated sexual harassment, including "online", "cyber", "internet" and "digital", "sexual violence", "abuse", "aggression" and "victimisation". There also is a lack of a definitive, comprehensive definition of technology-facilitated sexual harassment used by policymakers, researchers and others nationally and internationally, which presents challenges when comparing studies and data (Henry et al., 2020). We use the terminology of technology-facilitated sexual harassment to reflect that this behaviour is an extension of sexual harassment behaviours, which are facilitated by technology. Technology-facilitated sexual harassment also encompasses the wide range of technologies used to sexually harass, including mobile phones, cameras and digital platforms.

The literature on technology-facilitated sexual harassment has tended to focus on children and adolescents, and within settings such as universities. Very little research is available specifically about technology-facilitated sexual harassment in the workplace. The literature that has examined WTFSH indicates that it is a prevalent, pervasive and growing problem that affects many, especially young people, women and people from minoritised and marginalised groups, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, people with disability and the LGBTQ community.

In their review of the empirical research on technology-facilitated sexual violence, Henry et al. (2020) found that there is a lack of research on the nature and prevalence of sexually violent behaviours involving technology (see also Patel & Roesch, 2022). Nonetheless emerging research has identified a wide range of behaviours, including online sexual harassment, gender- and sexuality-based harassment, cyberstalking, image-based sexual exploitation and the use of electronic communications to coerce a victim into an unwelcome sexual act (Henry et al., 2020; Patel & Roesch, 2022; Reed et al., 2020). Furthermore, Henry et al. (2020) found that most studies have only focused on a small number of behaviours and have not looked at the context behind those behaviours, including the impacts or harms (Henry et al., 2020, p. 203). However, again looking across the literature, they found that "the reach, nature, and duration of these harms, as well as the current gaps in legal redress available to victims, makes them both insidious and difficult to respond to" (p. 203). Although this literature is not referring to workplace harassment specifically, the features and harms of such violence can likely be extended to WTFSH. This research has contributed to a sense of urgency regarding the need for research and policy reform in this area, particularly in relation to gaps in pathways to safety and justice for victims and survivors and the drivers of perpetration.

Prevalence

Sexual harassment in Australia is prevalent, with a majority (77%) of Australians – 89 per cent of women and 64 per cent of men – aged 15 years or over having experienced sexual harassment in their lifetime (AHRC, 2022, p. 12). Personal Safety Survey data indicates that of the 13 per cent of Australian women (or 1.3 million) who experienced sexual harassment in 2021 to 2022, the majority experienced sexual harassment from a known person (63%) who they were in a work/professional relationship with (27%; Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2023). Accordingly, rates of sexual harassment in the workplace in Australia are also high, with about 1 in 3 (33%) people – 41 per cent of women and 26 per cent of men – having experienced this form of harassment in the last 5 years (AHRC, 2022, p. 12). And Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data indicates that 26 per cent of women who experienced sexual harassment over a 12-month period experienced it at work and 57 per cent experienced it electronically (ABS, 2023).

Rates of workplace sexual harassment are consistently high among young Australians and decrease with age, with 46 per cent of people aged 18 to 29 years having experienced this form of harassment in the last 5 years (AHRC, 2022, p. 12) and women aged 18 to 24 years the most likely to have experienced sexual harassment (35%) in the last 12 months, and women aged 65 years and over the least likely (3.2%; ABS, 2023). These rates are similar in the United Kingdom, where comparable data indicates that 30 per cent of women and 27 per cent of men in employment experienced some form of sexual harassment in their workplace or work-related environment in the last 12 months (Adams et al., 2019, p. 68). Again, young people aged 16 to 24 years and 25 to 34 years were most at risk (at 42% and 44% respectively; Adams et al., 2019, p. 70).

Research also indicates that minoritised and marginalised groups are at increased risk of experiencing workplace sexual harassment. Douglass et al. (2018) found that young Australians identifying as female, trans and gender diverse, and non-heterosexual are at risk of in-person and technology-facilitated sexual harassment. Similarly, UK research found that lesbian, gay and bisexual victims and survivors of sexual harassment in the workplace were more likely than heterosexuals to have experienced harassment online or via work-related messaging (24% vs 19%; Adams et al., 2019, p. 115). Correspondingly, Australian research found that 53 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers (55% of women and 50% of men) reported having experienced sexual harassment in the last 5 years, compared to 33 per cent of the general population (AHRC, 2020, p. 170).

Importantly the limited research available suggests that the factors underpinning these figures are multifaceted and intersecting. A case in point is that while the racism, bullying and harassment experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have causal links to sexual harassment, census data reveals that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers are also frequently employed in industries that have high rates of sexual

harassment (i.e. health care and social assistance) and in roles that often involve working with clients or patients in high risk, isolated situations (i.e. as community and personal service workers; AHRC, 2020, p. 170). These factors must also be considered alongside findings from recent "Indigenous-led" research (Brown et al., 2020), which found that over a quarter of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples surveyed (n = 1,033) reported working in culturally unsafe workplaces (i.e. in workplaces where they do not feel able to practise their culture free of ridicule or condemnation). The same study found almost two-thirds of respondents reported experiencing high identity strain (i.e. the strain employees feel when they themselves, or others, view their identity as not meeting the norms or expectations of the dominant culture in the workplace). This research highlights that multiple interconnecting factors increase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers' exposure to sexual harassment in the workplace.

Like domestic and family violence, there are indications that technology-facilitated sexual violence increased during the COVID-19 pandemic (Flynn et al., 2021; Pfitzner et al., 2020; Powell & Flynn, 2020). The eSafety Commissioner reported a surge in reports of online harm during the pandemic and reports almost doubled in areas including image-based abuse (sharing intimate images and videos without consent; Dagg, 2020; Powell & Flynn, 2020). However, there is a lack of data regarding whether these increases extended to WTFSH.

McDonald and Charlesworth (2016) note that while men are overwhelmingly responsible for sexual harassment against women in the workplace, there are also less typical manifestations, including sexual harassment by men of other men and by women of men or other women. In the 2022 AHRC survey, both women and men victims and survivors were most likely to have been harassed by a man, with 77 per cent of victims and survivors of workplace sexual harassment being sexually harassed by one or more men perpetrators (91% of women victims and survivors, 55% of men victims and survivors; AHRC, et al., 2022, p. 58). In the United Kingdom, 81 per cent of cases of sexual harassment of women in the workplace were by a man/men, while 46 per cent of cases of sexual harassment of men were committed by another man/men (35% of cases of harassment of men were by a woman/women; Adams et al., 2019, p. 75). Additionally, research indicates that in both typical and less typical manifestations of sexual harassment, it functions as a form of gender policing, reinforcing norms of masculinity that dominate individual workplaces in socially acceptable ways (Cleveland et al., 2005; Fitzgerald et al., 1997; McDonald & Charlesworth, 2016).

Research also reveals that workers in some industries are likely to experience higher rates of sexual harassment than workers in other industries and that there are specific workplace characteristics that contribute to higher levels of sexual harassment. The AHRC's 2022 national survey on sexual harassment in workplaces found that workers in the information, media and telecommunications (64%) and arts and recreation services (44%) industries experience the highest levels of sexual harassment (p. 109). The 2020 *Respect@Work* Inquiry went on to identify a range of workplace characteristics that may contribute to sexual harassment, including male-dominated workplaces, work involving high levels of contact with customers, clients or patients, and hierarchical workplace structures (AHRC, 2020, p. 218). O'Connor et al. (2021) identified organisational characteristics that facilitate gender-based violence and harassment in higher education, including male-dominant hierarchical character, neoliberal managerialist ethos and gender/intersectional incompetent leadership.

Consequences

The consequences of workplace sexual harassment are significant, with psychological, health and work-related effects, including absenteeism, anxiety, depression and lower job satisfaction and productivity (AHRC, 2022; Chan et al., 2008; Charlesworth, 2006; Fitzgerald et al., 1997, 1999; Hayes, 2005; AHRC, 2004; McDonald, 2012). The AHRC survey found that experiences of sexual harassment in the workplace have ongoing consequences including negative impacts on self-esteem and confidence (14%) and mental or emotional health, or caused stress (14%), as well as decreased job satisfaction (13%) and commitment to the organisation (13%; AHRC, 2022, p. 98). Ultimately, workplace sexual harassment can compromise people's careers and ability to earn an income. In the context of a sector-wide survey of local government council employees and councillors (n = 9,939), the Victorian Auditor-General's Office (VAGO) observed that workplace sexual harassment could contribute to a culture where women may not seek re-election, making it challenging to address their under-representation in elected council roles (2020, p. 11). Online harassment can also lead to offline harassment, with an international survey of women journalists (n = 714) finding that 20 per cent of respondents said they had been attacked or abused offline in connection with the online violence they had experienced (Posetti et al., 2020, p. 10).

Yet formal reporting of sexual harassment in the workplace is very low. The 2022 AHRC survey found that 18 per cent (or fewer than 1 in 5 people) made a formal report or complaint (p. 8). Similarly, the VAGO report found that while 28 per cent of those surveyed experienced sexual harassment at work in the previous 12 months, only 2 per cent made a formal report (Victorian Auditor-General's Office [VAGO], 2020, p. 10). There are many reasons for the under-reporting of workplace sexual harassment, including the fear of reports being met with scepticism or retribution and the fact that some victims and survivors are unlikely to recognise the behaviours they have experienced as sexual harassment (AHRC, 2018, 2022; Henry et al., 2020). The AHRC 2022 report found that the main reasons for not reporting were because people thought it was not serious (42%), it was easier to keep quiet (38%), people would think they were over-reacting (31%), it would not change things/nothing would be done (28%), they thought the complaint process would be difficult or embarrassing (19%), and their reputation or career would be affected (14%; AHRC, 2022, p. 14). This means that employers and others are likely to underestimate the amount and frequency of harassment that takes place. According to the AHRC, those who do make a report are most likely to do so to their manager or supervisor (45%), followed by the head of the organisation or business owner (27%; 2022, p. 133).

The absence of consequences for harassers compounds the low numbers of reports. Of those who did make a report, about 1 in 4 cases (24%) resulted in no consequences for the harasser, and 2 in 5 people (40%) who made a complaint said no changes occurred in their workplace as a result of the complaint (AHRC, 2022, p. 14). In addition, people who reported faced negative consequences including being ostracised, victimised or ignored by colleagues (13%), resigning (13%) or being labelled a troublemaker (12%; AHRC, 2022, p. 14). Research from the United Kingdom found that of those who had chosen to report sexual harassment at work, satisfaction with the process and with the outcome were relatively low: 19 per cent said there were no consequences for their perpetrator, 50 per cent saw their job change in some way due to taking action, and 17 per cent "chose" to look for a new job (Adams et al., 2019, p. 9). A growing body of research suggests that informal, often confidential self-reporting can play an important role for victims and survivors of sexual assault and harassment in helping them find supportive communities, seek advice and be heard, as well as helping to provide more accurate prevalence data (Heydon & Powell, 2018; Loney Howes et al., 2022; O'Neill, 2018). As sexual harassment has been identified as part of the continuum of sexual violence (see, for example, Kelly, 1987), it seems pertinent to consider whether similar strategies may assist victims and survivors of workplace sexual harassment. We explore this as a potential option to address the low numbers of reporting of WTFSH in more detail in Chapter 6.

Drivers of perpetration

Research indicates that technology-facilitated sexual harassment is a complex issue with multiple drivers of perpetration (Flynn et al., 2022, 2023a), and it seems unlikely that this complexity is any less present in a workplace context. Research on workplace sexual harassment in the United Kingdom indicates that technology (specifically online and work-related messaging) is used to facilitate all forms of sexual harassment, from sexual jokes and comments to actual or attempted rape, and pictures and videos shared without permission (Adams et al., 2019, p. 114). Henry et al. (2020) found that perpetrators of technology-facilitated sexual violence may be motivated to engage in such behaviours to procure rape or sexual assault, revenge, sexual pleasure, power, or to seek enjoyment, entertainment, social status or monetary gain.

A United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) survey of women journalists (n = 901) found that abuse with hateful language, unwanted private messages and reputational threats were the top three types of online threats respondents had experienced (Posetti et al., 2020, p. 6). Highlighting the misogyny underlying this kind of harassment, the researchers also found that the news story or conversation most likely to trigger high levels of online abuse was gender (47%; Posetti et al., 2020, p. 8). Concerningly, 41 per cent of respondents said they had been targeted in online attacks that appeared to be linked to orchestrated disinformation campaigns (Posetti et al., 2020, p. 2). A subsequent UNESCO study underscored the "chilling" or silencing effects of this kind of harassment, revealing that 30 per cent of women journalists surveyed said that in response to online violence they self-censored on social media, and 20 per cent withdrew from all online interaction (Posetti et al., 2022, p. 12). Further, 11 per cent reported missing work to recover from online violence, 38 per cent said they made themselves less visible, 4 per cent quit their jobs, and 2 per cent abandoned journalism altogether (Posetti et al., 2022, p. 12). Case studies and interviews in the UNESCO report (Posetti et al., 2022, pp. 17, 100, 119) revealed that online harassment was often designed to (sometimes successfully) professionally discredit victims and survivors.

Other gendered factors that have been found to correlate with the perpetration of sexually harmful behaviours are the acceptance of rape myths and victim blaming (i.e. perpetrators and society blaming victims and survivors to justify their actions); attitudes that downplay or diminish violence against women; and adherence to rigid, harmful gender stereotypes (e.g. that women's primary role is in the home; Pina et al., 2009; Powell et al., 2015; Reilly et al., 1992). Accordingly, considerable research indicates that women in non-traditional roles, such as CEOs and police officers, may be at increased risk of workplace sexual harassment (Brown, 1998; European Commission, 1999; LaFontaine & Tredeau, 1986). The report on the findings of Australia's 2021 National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey (n = 19,100), *Attitudes Matter: The 2021 National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey, Findings for Australia*, found that while understanding and attitudes regarding violence against women are improving, further progress is needed, in particular: understanding of the gendered nature of domestic violence (e.g. considerable proportions of respondents incorrectly believed that men and women equally perpetrate domestic violence [41%]); attitudes that support gender inequality (e.g. the view that women mistakenly interpret innocent remarks as sexist [41%]); and problematic myths and stereotypes about sexual assault, sexual consent and victims and survivors (e.g. the belief that women lie about sexual assault as a way of "getting back at men" [34%], or because they later regret consensual sexual interactions [24%]; Coumarelos et al., 2023, pp. 22–28). These problematic types of attitudes and understandings regarding violence against women at the population level reflect a culture that enables gendered violence to occur and perpetrators to justify their actions.

In light of the gendered drivers and impacts of technology-facilitated sexual harassment, Henry et al. (2020) argue that research and practice must be guided by existing conceptual frameworks that utilise gender theory as a key but not the exclusive factor. Similarly, Henry and Powell (2015) contend that re-traditionalised gender hierarchies and inequalities manifest online, providing new mediums for old behaviours. Citron (2009) further asserts that recognising cyber harassment for what it is – gender discrimination – is crucial to understanding its harms, ensuring that complaints are heard, improving online safety and reducing perpetration.

Diverse characteristics

The research suggests that technology-facilitated or online sexual harassment shares many characteristics with offline sexual harassment. However, developments such as coordinated attacks on individual journalists and politicians indicate that technologies can enable new and omnipresent forms of violence. In their review, Henry et al. (2020) conclude that technologies allow for new types of harassment that were either not previously possible or take on a substantially different character online. Barak (2005) documents how online sexual harassment behaviours parallel those offline and identifies how specific characteristics of online culture and technology, such as anonymity, reinforce those behaviours. Salerno-Ferraro et al. (2022) found that technology-facilitated sexual violence is pervasive and harmful and that young women often experience sexually inappropriate messages, sexist remarks, seductive behaviour, and unwanted sexual attention from unknown men online from a very young age.

Having provided an insight into the literature exploring workplace sexual harassment, we outline the methodology for our study in the next chapter before presenting the findings.

Methods

A three-stage, mixed methods design was developed to respond to the research questions involving in-depth interviews, a national survey and qualitative focus groups. We describe each of these stages below.

Stage 1: Qualitative interviews

Recruitment and sample

Stage 1 involved conducting 20 in-depth qualitative interviews of approximately 60 minutes via Zoom with technology platform providers, employer representatives, workplace safety regulators and online safety experts. Each interview was conducted by one researcher. The research team used a purposive recruitment strategy to enable diverse professional representation among participants. Recruitment involved invitations from existing contacts and members of the PAG, publicly available information (e.g. websites) and developed research collaborations, and a snowballing approach where research participants were encouraged to recommend others the research team should speak to. Ethical approval was received from the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee before conducting the interviews (project no. 32325).

Demographics

Participants were aged from 30 to 62 years and came from a range of self-nominated cultural backgrounds, including Anglo/Anglo-Celtic (6), Caucasian (2), Korean-Australian (1) and Aboriginal (Koori/Yorta Yorta) heritage (1). Most participants used she/her pronouns (13), with 3 using he/him, and 2 using they/them. Three participants identified as men, 15 were women, 1 identified as non-binary, and 1 did not provide details regarding their gender. Most participants resided in Victoria (Vic; 8) or New South Wales (NSW; 6), with South Australia (SA; 1), the Australian Capital Territory (ACT; 1), Queensland (Qld; 1) and Western Australia (WA; 1) also represented.

Interview schedule

Interviews took place from May to July 2022. On two occasions, the interviews were conducted with two participants and one interviewer to facilitate participant availability. The interview questions explored:

1) examples of WTFSH the participants were aware of
2) background contexts to current laws, policies and regulations relating to WTFSH
3) potential or known challenges to detecting and responding to WTFSH (e.g. perpetrator anonymity, problems applying regulations)
4) the extent and circumstances under which technology providers might or should be liable for WTFSH
5) recommendations for best-practice responses to WTFSH, including legal, social, technical concepts and education.

Data analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, with identifying information removed. Pseudonyms were applied using RP for research participants and an assigned number of up to 20 (i.e. RP1, RP2). The participant's gender (man, woman, non-binary) were also included. The transcripts were imported into NVivo and thematically analysed to identify key and recurring issues, concerns, challenges and recommendations identified by participants in response to the research questions.

Stage 2: Quantitative perpetration survey

Stage 2 comprised a national quantitative survey of adult Australians aged 18 years and over who had been engaged in paid or voluntary work within the last 15 years. The online survey asked about their engagement in the perpetration of WTFSH. The survey instrument was developed in consultation with the PAG (see below) using adaptations from existing instruments. In particular, survey items were adapted from: the AHRC's (2018) fourth national survey of victim and survivor experiences of sexual harassment in Australian workplaces; the technology-facilitated sexual violence survey developed by Powell and Henry (2017, 2019); the image-based sexual abuse surveys developed by Powell and colleagues (Powell & Henry, 2019; Powell, Scott et al., 2022; Powell et al., 2024); the Illinois Sexual Harassment Myth Acceptance (ISHMA) scale (Lonsway et al., 2008); the Gender Equality Attitudes Scale (GEAS) developed as part of the National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey (NCAS; Webster et al., 2018, 2021); and selected items from the Digital Inclusion Index (Wilson et al., 2019). The resulting instrument encompassed five substantive question modules, which are described further below. Ethical approval was sought and received from the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee prior to conducting the survey (project no. 32376).

Recruitment and sample

Research provider Qualtrics Panels was engaged to administer the online survey, including respondent recruitment via invitations sent to prospective participants in an opt-in database. The in-scope sample for the project was Australian adults (aged 18+ years) who had been engaged in some kind of workplace participation, whether paid or voluntary, within 15 years prior to the survey (1 July 2007). Given the project's focus on technology-facilitated forms of workplace harassment, this period was selected to account for the public launch of several social media platforms since 2007 and the likely integration of a wider range of digital devices and applications in people's contemporary working lives. For this project, a total of 7,247 active in-scope panel members were invited to participate in the survey, and 3,358 completed the survey, resulting in a completion rate of 46.3 per cent. Quota sampling was applied during recruitment to reflect the gender and age composition of the Australian adult working population. All respondents received a nominal compensation from Qualtrics ($10) for their time to complete the survey. Transgender, non-binary, gender diverse and/or other gender identity respondents were invited to participate in the research. However, insufficient numbers of respondents (to include in the statistical analyses for reliability/validity sake) chose to share their identification as a transgender man or woman (n = 5), non-binary (n = 5), gender diverse, another gender identity or preferred not to disclose a gender identity (n = 3), which may reflect the composition of the panel recruitment provider. This resulted in a final sample of 3,345 (women: n = 1,777, men: n = 1,568, additional sample demographics provided in Appendix A, Table A1).

Demographics

Respondents answered questions on demographic items, including reporting their: gender (man, woman, transgender man, transgender woman, non-binary, intersex, another gender), age, sexuality (heterosexual; as well as lesbian, gay, bisexual, asexual or another sexuality [LGBA+]), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status, languages other than English (LOTE) spoken at home, disability status, geographic location (capital city or its surrounding neighbourhoods, major city or urban centre, regional town or surrounds, rural or remote), and highest level of education or training.

Measures of digital use and confidence

Survey respondents answered questions including three sets of items measuring key aspects of digital participation. These were: frequency of internet access (5-point Likert scale where 1 = Once a month or less, 2 = A few times a month, 3 = A few times a week, 4 = About once a day, 5 = Several times a day); and five attitudes items from the Digital Ability Sub-Index (Wilson et al., 2019) including "Computers and technology give me more control over my life" and "I go out of my way to learn everything I can about new technologies" (5-point Likert scale where 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Somewhat disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Somewhat agree, and 5 = Strongly

agree). Item ratings were summed to create an overall digital use and ability score (possible range 6 to 30), where higher mean scores indicate greater frequency and breadth of digital participation, as well as attitudinal confidence in one's digital abilities. Cronbach's alpha for the overall digital participation score was α = .51 indicating good internal consistency. Scores were re-coded into categories for logistic regression analyses, indicating low digital use and confidence (6 to 18), moderate use and confidence (19 to 25) and high use and confidence (26 to 30).

Attitudes towards sexual harassment

Respondents answered a set of 20 items adapted from the ISHMA scale (Lonsway et al., 2008), as well as six filler, or "out-of-scale" items as proposed by the scale authors. Drawing on the advice of the PAG, and given the survey would be administered to both men and women who had engaged in workplace sexual harassment behaviours, adaptations were made to the filler items so as to reflect greater gender diversity in the language presented to respondents. For example, the item "'sexual harassment complaints must be taken seriously" became "'sexual harassment against men must be taken seriously", and "'women should not have to tolerate sexual harassment in the workplace" became "'trans men and trans women should not have to tolerate sexual harassment in the workplace." Other example items retained from the original ISHMA scale include: "'women often file frivolous charges of sexual harassment" and "'if a woman is sexually harassed, she must have done something to invite it" (5-point Likert scale where 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Somewhat disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Somewhat agree, and 5 = Strongly agree). Item ratings were summed to create an "overall attitudes towards sexual harassment score", where higher mean scores indicate greater endorsement of sexual harassment myths. Cronbach's alpha for the ISHMA items was .958, indicating very high internal validity. Scores were re-coded into categories for logistic regression analyses, indicating low myth endorsement (20 to 39), moderate myth endorsement (40 to 69) and high myth endorsement (70 to 100). The out-of-scale items are not included in the overall score or the analyses here; however, item frequencies are presented in Appendix A (Table A4).

Workplace sexual harassment perpetration

In this section, survey respondents first answered questions adapted from a set of 11 items from the AHRC (2018) workplace sexual harassment survey, describing behaviours that they had ever engaged in: "towards someone in a work context, using a digital device or app, in a way that they may have found unwelcome". Work context was defined as "either at the workplace, at a work-related event, on a work-related trip, in an informal or social setting where several work colleagues were present, or in communications with people from work. This includes communications that extend after work hours and outside of the physical workplace." Digital device or app was defined as "devices such as via mobile phones, telephones, tablets, laptop or desktop computers, or the internet, whether through email, SMS, phone or video calls, messages, chats, or other applications". Example items using a digital device or app included: "repeated invitations to go out on dates", "requests or pressure for sex or other sexual acts" and "sexually suggestive comments or jokes". Items were summed and coded to create an overall binary engagement in the WTFSH measure (0 = No, 1 = Yes).

After responding to the 11-item set and the formal complaint item, respondents who had disclosed any engagement in WTFSH behaviours were asked a series of follow-up questions, including: the gender, age, and professional relationship to the victim and survivor in their most recent incident; whether the incident occurred after 1 March 2020, and whether they were working from home around the time the incident occurred; whether the incident was a one-off or repeated behaviour; the digital devices or applications used; the applicability of a set of possible motivations in using the behaviours (such as "I wanted to annoy the person" and "I wanted to frighten them"); and their organisational context at the time (such as industry type, workforce size, gender composition of the workforce, and perceived culture of "unwelcome sexual behaviour" at the workplace).

All survey respondents were asked a further set of 13 items from the AHRC (2018) workplace sexual harassment survey describing in-person or face-to-face behaviours

that they had ever engaged in towards someone in a work context and in a way that the person may have found unwelcome. Examples of in-person sexual harassment items included: "unwelcome touching or cornering", "sexual staring or leering", and "sexually suggestive comments or jokes". Items were summed and coded to create an overall binary engagement in workplace face-to-face sexual harassment (FFSH) measure (0 = No, 1 = Yes). The WTFSH and in-person sexual harassment were further summed and coded to create an overall any workplace sexual harassment measure (0 = No, 1 = Yes).

Sexist and discriminatory attitudes

Respondents answered the 18-item GEAS, developed by Webster and colleagues (2018) for the 2017 NCAS (see also Webster et al., 2021), which measures the endorsement of sexist and gender-discriminatory attitudes. Items ask respondents to rate their agreement with a range of statements indicative of attitudes supporting gender inequality across both public and private life, such as: "men should take control in relationships and be the head of the household", "women often flirt with men just to be hurtful", and "in the workplace, men generally make more capable bosses than women" (5-point Likert scale where 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Somewhat disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Somewhat agree, and 5 = Strongly agree). Cronbach's alpha for the scale was α = .961, indicating very robust internal consistency. Items were summed to create an overall score between 18 and 90, with higher mean scores indicating greater attitudinal support for gender inequality. Scores were re-coded into categories for logistic regression analyses, indicating low endorsement of sexist and discriminatory attitudes (18 to 39), moderate endorsement (40 to 64) and high endorsement (65 to 90).

Based on the advice of the PAG and following the example of filler items from Lonsway et al.'s (2008) ISHMA scale, a further eight items were displayed among the GEAS items, to include discriminatory attitudes towards migrants and sexuality and gender diverse people in the item language presented to respondents. These out-of-scale items are not included in the GEAS score or analyses here but are displayed in Appendix A (Table A5).

Data analysis

Data analysis was undertaken using IBM SPSS (version 28) and proceeded in three stages. First, descriptive statistical analyses were conducted to report on the extent and nature of workplace sexual harassment behaviours. Second, bivariate analyses were conducted to examine whether there were significant differences according to gender. Finally, multivariate modelling (binary logistic regression using the enter method) was conducted to determine the significant predictors of engagement in WTFSH, with twelve independent variables entered into the model, namely: eight demographic variables (gender, sexuality, age, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander status, LOTE, disability, geographic location, level of education); two attitudinal variables (ISHMA, GEAS); and two behavioural variables (digital participation score, engagement in in-person workplace sexual harassment).

Stage 3: Focus groups

Recruitment and sample

Stage 3 comprised a series of five online focus group discussions of 1-hour duration with 28 adult workers aged 18 to 39 years. The focus groups were conducted across Australia via the Zoom digital platform in March 2023. Participants were asked questions regarding their perceptions and knowledge of WTFSH and WTFSH responses/policies, including being presented with hypothetical scenarios involving WTFSH. Ethical approval was received from the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee before conducting the focus groups (project no. 32325).

We sought to recruit participants who were or had been employed in some capacity within the last 12 months, aged between 18 to 39 years, and sought to over-recruit those identifying as women to reflect the age range and gender identity of those most likely to be impacted by WTFSH, based on the AHRC (2018, 2022) studies. The participants were recruited through social media advertisements on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook. Over 350 people expressed an interest in participating, although this included 103 responses from people not in Australia who were ineligible to participate in the study given the national focus of the research. To capture a more diverse sample within the target group, all people interested in participating were asked to complete a demographic questionnaire. The questionnaire asked potential participants about their age and gender identity, employment status, and why they wanted to participate in the study, as well as some basic demographic questions around cultural background, sexuality, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander status, and state of residence. Our research target was 25 participants as per our funding body agreement. A total of 32 people, who best reflected a more diverse range of people, were invited to be part of the project, and 28 ultimately participated. Participants received a small honorarium gift card ($40) to acknowledge their time.

Demographics

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Table 1: Focus group participant demographics

Characteristic	*n*	%
Age (bracket):		
18–24 years	*7*	25%
25–31 years	*11*	39%
31–39 years	*10*	36%
Gender:		
Women	*23*	82%
Men	*5*	18%
Sexual orientation:		
Straight (Heterosexual)	*22*	79%
LGBTQ	*6*	21%
State/Territory:		
NSW	*10*	36%
Vic	*10*	36%
Qld	*4*	14%
Tas	*2*	7%
WA	*2*	7%
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander:		
Aboriginal	*2*	7%
Torres Strait Islander	*1*	4%
Country of birth:		
Australia	*18*	64%
China	*4*	14%
India	*2*	7%
Ireland	*1*	4%
Fiji	*1*	4%
Hong Kong	*1*	4%
New Zealand	*1*	4%

Of the participants, 82 per cent identified as women and 18 per cent as men; no participants self-disclosed being transgender, non-binary or other gender diversity. Over three-quarters (79%) identified as straight, with 31 per cent identifying as bisexual, gay or lesbian, queer or unsure about their sexual orientation. Approximately 10.5 per cent of participants identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. The majority of participants were employed full-time (39%) or part-time (29%), with the rest either casual (14%), looking for work (11%) or studying and not looking for work (7%). The participants were primarily born in Australia (64%), with the next most significant majority being born in China (14%) and India (7%). Other participants were born in Ireland, Fiji, Hong Kong and New Zealand. In terms of age, 25 per cent were aged between 18 to 24 years, 39 per cent between 25 to 31 years and 36 per cent between 31 to 39 years. At the time of completing the focus groups, most participants lived in NSW (36%) and Vic (36%), followed by Qld (14%), WA (7%) and Tas (7%).

Focus group schedule

The focus groups aimed to develop an understanding of what young people (18 to 39 years) currently understand about WTFSH, including avenues for support for victims and survivors and perpetrators. Participants were first asked questions regarding their understanding of WTFSH and any knowledge of WTFSH policies and processes at their place of employment. To further explore WTFSH, two hypothetical scenarios (see Table 2) were used to prompt discussion of current laws, policies, tools, responses and support avenues relating to WTFSH detection, punishment and prevention. The use of hypothetical scenarios, also sometimes referred to as vignettes or case studies, in focus group research on social issues is a well-established method that enables participants to respond to potentially sensitive topics in a way that elicits their attitudes and views without referencing their personal experiences (see e.g. Bradbury-Jones et al., 2012; Larcombe et al., 2016).

Table 2: Focus group scenarios

Scenario 1

Tina is 19 years old and works in a bar. She loves her job, although the late hours can be a bit of a pain – she has great colleagues, and they always hang out and have a drink after work. One of Tina's colleagues is Ben. Ben is a 24-year-old man, and he is one of the bar managers. Tina starts to receive unsolicited messages of a sexual nature from Ben, via Facebook Messenger, which the bar staff use to share the roster and swap shifts etc. Tina always has a laugh with Ben at work, but she finds the messages creepy and ignores them, hoping that Ben will get the message and stop sending them.

Ben continues to send Tina sexual messages, so one night after work she mentions this to the bar owner, Jane. Jane tells Tina that it's probably a joke and that Tina should raise the issue with Ben directly first. Tina tells Jane she feels uncomfortable saying anything to Ben, so Jane says to just let it go. Tina feels she has no option but to resign as she does not feel safe or supported at work.

Scenario 2

Kevin is a really charismatic and lovely person – everyone at work enjoys his company. Kevin often jokes about men who come into the office for meetings and whether or not they might be single and "his type". Kevin's boss, Lachlan, starts to send Kevin sexually explicit photos of men to his personal email account outside work hours and asks Kevin to rate them. Kevin is shocked and does not respond. One morning in the office, Lachlan asks Kevin if he has lost his sense of humour and asks why he doesn't ever respond to his emails. Kevin asks you for advice.

After being presented with the scenarios, participants were asked to describe: what they would do if the victim and survivor came to them for advice in this situation; if they were aware of any policy, tools, responses and support avenues for victims and survivors and perpetrators, and how these could be improved; whether the behaviour is/should be against the law; and if they would recommend the victim and survivor report the behaviour externally to their workplace, for example, to the police or technology provider. These questions were designed to identify ways current processes could be improved and new avenues for supporting victims and survivors and educating perpetrators of WTFSH. The discussion also sought to understand knowledge and awareness of WTFSH among participants.

Data analysis

The online focus groups were conducted in accordance with best practice guidelines in the field (see Gamhewage et al., 2022), embodying a sensitive and considerate framework that prioritises participants' wellbeing and safety. Two researchers conducted each of the focus groups, allowing one researcher to move into a breakout room with a participant in the unlikely event they became distressed (this did not occur). All focus groups and interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by an external transcription service. Some of the quotes presented in this report have been slightly edited to remove hesitations (e.g. um, ah, like) or repetition (e.g. the, the workplace), but not to distort their meaning. Identifying information (real names, specific locations, businesses, etc.) has been removed to maintain participant anonymity. Throughout this report, only the focus group identifier and gender of the participants are provided, for example, Man 2 FG1 or Woman 4 FG5.

The focus group data was analysed using Dovetail – a qualitative data analysis platform that allows research teams to code and analyse data together in real time across devices. Two team members were engaged in the thematic analysis process, which involved developing a set of codes relevant to the research questions and aims and analysing data according to these codes. Key trends were then identified and are presented in this report.

Project Advisory Group

At the start of the project, the researchers established a Project Advisory Group (PAG; see Appendix B) to bring together the perspectives of researchers, practitioners, advocates and policymakers from relevant government, non-government and technology company stakeholders. The PAG members provided feedback and advice on the overall project design and instrument design for each stage of the project. This included advice at scheduled Zoom meetings and via email on research methods, design of research tools, recruitment processes, analysis of findings, and the implications of key findings for policy and practice.

Study limitations

Like all studies, this one has limitations. The research includes a non-probability sample of participants, which is not representative. To address this, we sought to increase the robustness of our findings in two main ways: firstly, by using quota sampling according to census data on age and gender in the survey, to approximate the population of Australia and improve confidence in the findings; secondly, through the focus group demographic questionnaire, which sought to identify a diversity of people within the target cohort.

Nevertheless, we do not have a nationally representative selection of participants, and the findings cannot claim to be considered as such. We also had more women than men participants across the interviews and the focus groups, and no participants specifically identified as transgender or another gender in the focus groups. Only one interview participant identified as non-binary and another interview participant declined to identify their gender. This again points to a lack of representation in the dataset.

Limitations may also result in underestimating perpetration since the data relies on self-disclosing information about engagement in WTFSH. There is also the potential for overestimation of perpetration, although this is discounted by the experiences reported in other research exploring WTFSH and also technology-facilitated abuse perpetration more broadly (AHRC, 2018; Flynn et al., 2022; Vogels, 2021; Powell & Flynn, 2023; Powell, Scott et al., 2022; U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2022). The survey also provides an indication of lifetime engagement in WTFSH as disclosed by participants but not the frequency or regularity of engagement in these behaviours. This could be addressed in future research into perpetration of WTFSH. Importantly, this project did not set out to examine in-depth the experiences of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples. We acknowledge that future in-depth research should be led and/or co-designed with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples themselves. Despite these limitations, to our knowledge, this is the first mixed methods study to examine WTFSH perpetration in Australia, shining light on an important and under-researched form of harm.

Findings

Stage 1: Qualitative industry stakeholder interviews

This section reports on the findings of Stage 1 of the research, which comprised 20 in-depth interviews with industry stakeholders, including employer representatives, technology providers, regulators and workplace and online safety experts exploring the prevalence, context, characteristics and complexities of WTFSH. In this section, we explore participant perspectives regarding the drivers, behaviours and characteristics of WTFSH perpetration, key trends of WTFSH, and key challenges and responses to WTFSH.

Overall, the industry stakeholder interviews revealed high levels of concern regarding the increasing prevalence and pervasiveness of WTFSH. The interviews also suggested a range of different types and characteristics of WTFSH, from harassment by co-workers, clients, customers and competitors, to organised harassment from groups of people with a shared goal of silencing an individual or group, often based on their identity (i.e. gender, race, sexuality, etc.). Participants, particularly employer representatives, frequently highlighted the need for guidance and information regarding how to address WTFSH when it arises and how to prevent it before it starts through the development of positive workplace cultures that discourage and disallow harassment. Employer representatives identified perpetrator accountability as an issue on which they require more support and guidance. There was a sense that reactions to and penalties for perpetrators are often not commensurate with the harassment committed so that responses are either excessive or insufficient. Some research participants recounted situations in which perpetrators had decided to leave their jobs when the harassment committed was perceived by the employer to be relatively minor. Examples provided by participants included paying someone too much attention by sending them too many messages and being overly familiar (for example, asking people personal questions). Such outcomes were seen to be undesirable for everyone involved.

WTFSH

Interviews with research participants revealed that WTFSH can encompass a range of behaviours from "stepping over the line" and paying someone too much attention or sending them too many emails to more extreme behaviours, such as "pile-ons", sending rape threats, doxing someone and attempting to destroy their reputation. The below sample of comments is representative of the range of common responses participants provided when asked to give examples of WTFSH they had come across in their workplaces or their work:

> There was an employee of an organisation whose staff member just gave them that little bit of extra attention, and it was all through the sort of online space, so it was extra messages on Teams, and sending virtual birthday cards, just to that person. And making sort of inappropriate comments that they just absolutely had no – said that they didn't think it was inappropriate *[sic]* at all. (Woman RP1)

> He personally delivered a bunch of flowers to this young staff member, at her house, when she hadn't given him her address, and she'd specifically said that she was a private person. (Woman RP14)

> One matter that springs to mind is where you will have a person repeatedly contacting somebody when they have suggested that it's made them uncomfortable, so a volume of messages, frequency of messages, talking about things that the person wasn't interested in talking about and that kind of issue. It could also be a person receiving a graphic or a sexual type of image through a message, or other type of form, or through social media, so it's those types of issues that we've seen come up typically. (Woman RP20)

> We have been involved directly in cases where you have employees that may set up WhatsApp groups or messenger groups where the purpose is to cement employee relationships and bonds … and there have been some instances where people have engaged in those sorts of groups in ways that were not appropriate ... We've also seen some cases involving the use of memes as well – I guess related to image-based abuse. (Woman RP3)

> One area that we have had … a fair number of reports is in relation to Google reviews … one complainant has said that he … received a … number of really … abusive sexual harassing comments … posted as a Google review on his business page. (Woman RP6)

While representing a broad range of behaviours, individual participants' definitions of WTFSH were often relatively narrow. They reflected their personal experiences of the issue, indicating a lack of community awareness of the very broad range of behaviours that WTFSH can encompass. For example, some participants' understanding of WTFSH focused narrowly on cases of WTFSH as office "relational pursuit". In contrast, other participants reflected on the changing nature of the workplace, which can expand the ways that people experience workplace sexual harassment. This was demonstrated by participants who spoke about an increase in seeing people become the target of organised campaigns, across multiple platforms, usually as a result of their high-profile career, such as journalists or politicians:

> We have situations where not necessarily just online sexual harassment, but online harassment where it can be very coordinated. And, so, you've got someone with a particular aim who can sort of activate a group of people to go and do this thing. And, so, if you've got a coordinated group of people telling you that you're worthless or an awful journalist, and in there as well there's, say, a rape threat, then it can be really hard to know what that scale – how many people want to do that to me and where are they? … I think that can be quite terrifying as well. (Woman RP15)

> The trend that's happening now is that it seems to come from not just the one platform. It's often multi-platformed, so people, if they really want to target someone, perpetrators are targeting Instagram, but then also LinkedIn and Facebook, all at the same time. Sometimes these can be personal messages, so DMs, and personal messages … but they can happen across platforms. (Woman RP2)

Some participants reflected on the nature of this type of WTFSH, which can also involve coordinated WTFSH campaigns targeting people due to their identity, for example, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples and LGBTQ people:

> We definitely see it targeted towards queer folks in particular. Transgender people in particular, they will be targeted by folks on places like [redacted internet forum that facilitates the harassment of online figures and communities], who will list all of their profiles, all their information, and they essentially say to these folks on [redacted internet forum that facilitates the harassment of online figures and communities] or any other platform, "This is the person we're trying to dox or take down, because they're bringing light [to] something that we don't like."
> (Non-binary & not revealed RP11 & RP12)

In their experience, participants more generally identified men as the primary perpetrators of WTFSH. As these comments reflect:

> The victims have – in the cases we've encountered – overwhelmingly been female and the perpetrators male. (Woman RP3)

> I'm saying "men" because it is vastly – it's a vast majority of our … I'm talking – 99 per cent of the cases, we're talking – is usually a man doing it. Older men – it's a real sense of entitlement and, "This is how we've always done things." (Woman RP4)

However, some reflected that despite expectations that perpetrators will be male, women also perpetrate WTFSH, with a few noting that women commit WTFSH against both men and women (including sex workers and young people):

> We have had cases where it's been the other way around, including one, actually, involving a case of online stalking where the female was the perpetrator and a victim was the male, and that also involved sending explicit images in an unauthorised and unwanted way to the other person. (Woman RP3)

> When I spoke to – particularly women in politics – is that they were getting a lot of sexual harassment from other women online, you know, so local councillors being harassed by other women, not necessarily in the workplace but it was like connected to their work. (Woman RP5)

For some participants we spoke to, the perpetrator was considered invisible, especially if they were "outside" and not a co-worker. As this participant explained:

> The thing with perpetrators is we don't always necessarily have involvement with who they may be. The approach for a regulator of workplace health and safety, certainly is to deal with, you know, we will have interaction with the injured person, and we'll have interaction with the business owners or whoever, who have the duty to prevent harm. So, we'll have conversations with those people. We don't necessarily always speak with the perpetrator. (Woman RP16)

A common view was also that perpetrators of WTFSH have a sense of entitlement and do not recognise, understand or care about boundaries:

> That sense of entitlement, and lack of awareness of what it would be experienced as from the people that he was doing it to. (Woman RP14)

> There's still a brazenness as well, to people who have been behaving this way for a long time and continue to behave this way … it still shocks me what some of our clients have in writing from other people in their workplace, that they've actually put that in writing. But there still does seem to be a brazenness to what people can get away with, even in writing. (Woman RP4; eSafety Commissioner, 2020)

At least one participant felt that the profile of the average perpetrator of WTFSH might be slightly different to the perpetrator of workplace sexual harassment in two ways, "age and technological proficiency" (Woman RP4).

Participants generally recognised that some groups are at a greater risk of WTFSH than others. Gender, lack of power, intersecting disadvantages and discriminations (including sexuality, cultural diversity and age, particularly being young) and type of work/industry (e.g. mining, law, massage therapy and media) were often identified as factors in victimisation, as these comments reflect:

> We've also seen a few examples around women who are from culturally diverse backgrounds or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women receiving sexual harassment that's also intersecting with other forms of discrimination and harassment. … Definitely sexuality has probably been something that's raised, in terms of a factor that increases vulnerability of experiencing sexual harassment. (Woman RP1)

> Younger women, non-binary people, they are – and also younger men as well, in particular circumstances. But, in particular, younger women are at the highest risk. Young people – in particular, young women – are our highest-risk cohort. They make up around 50 per cent of our entire clientele, so we don't – we know that young people are at highest – much higher risk of sexual violence in all its forms, and that's the same in a workplace setting. (Woman RP4)

Prevalence

Most research participants felt that the prevalence of WTFSH was increasing overall, but particularly in specific, often male-dominated industries like mining, government and the legal world, as well as industries like journalism, massage therapy and sex work. As these statements reflect:

> Clients of ours in the media and entertainment worlds, it's pretty shocking, but also in the legal world. So really highly dominating, really competitive workspaces, as well as more male dominated. So, women who might work in a mining or construction or tech setting, it can be pretty awful. But also, just areas – industries where there is quite a big gender disparity and a lot of – female-dominated, but female-dominated in junior positions, like in retail. (Woman RP4)

> So mining industry … construction, as another male-dominated industry. But media arts, you know, there's issues around that particular industry. I would also suggest that while it's not male-dominated, that the legal fraternity has also experienced some pretty significant forms of – particularly sexual harassment – but sexual assault. Dare I point to our political representatives as perhaps another venue. (Man RP18)

Whether or not WTFSH had increased due to the COVID-19 pandemic was a point of divergence among participants. Some mentioned that overall complaints of bullying and harassment were down during the pandemic and felt that this resulted from a reduction in social events, particularly events involving alcohol, which could "trigger" behaviours that would lead to complaints:

> During COVID, we would have seen less issues around this type of behaviour than we did before, I think, and let's see what happens afterwards. I think there has been a decrease, and that might not be the case in other industries or if you're looking at a purely online type of environment, but from a workplace setting, I suspect a lot of workplaces have seen less, because you have had less of those interactions so there's been less of the triggers. You're not going to have inappropriate touching for example, or things like that, which can often be the catalyst for someone to raise a complaint. (Woman RP20)

However, others identified that abuse and harassment, including WTFSH, had increased during and since the COVID-19 pandemic, mainly as many workplaces shifted into the online realm. As RP16 (Woman) recounted, "Complaints were still coming in. There were still some serious investigations, around all sorts of different things, but typically, your bullying and harassment matters didn't slow down."

Regardless of whether participants believed there was an increase in WTFSH during the pandemic, most felt that employers were ill-prepared for the consequences of the move to working from home, which had implications for those experiencing and perpetrating WTFSH:

> There are certainly, in general, workplaces, and this is our experience, they are grappling to catch up with a changing sort of work environment. So, whether that's working from home, creating safe environments at home, creating positive workplace cultures at home. And I think that that's then meant that there is more vulnerability for workers to experience sexual harassment … COVID has obviously exacerbated that, in some ways. And I think it increases the risk of – the safety risk, for women in particular. And also, the sort of level of isolation that many workers might be feeling. And that that can compound if they're experiencing sexual harassment because they may not have the clear guidance around where to go for help, what to do. (Woman RP1)

Another issue in determining the prevalence of WTFSH identified by participants was that victimisation data is unlikely to adequately reflect the true extent of WTFSH because awareness and prioritisation of WTFSH are still relatively low, and many do not recognise technology-facilitated forms of sexual harassment as a workplace issue. As these comments suggest:

> One of the tricky things is sort of marking out the borders and the boundaries between what is and isn't workplace sexual harassment online, when a lot of this stuff happens in people's homes because they're looking at it on their phone. (Woman RP5)

> A lot of employers and a lot of, generally, people in the workplace don't think it's a big issue in their workplace until you start unpacking what that might look like. And then, often … people go, "Oh, actually, yes. That does happen," or, "Yes, that did happen," "Yeah, actually, that is sexual harassment, isn't it?" (Woman RP4)

Linked to this view was the concern that reporting mechanisms for WTFSH are insufficient and often reactionary. In this regard, participants emphasised that employers frequently only responded to and prepared for WTFSH when issues arose and their organisation's reputation was potentially damaged, rather than taking a risk mitigation approach. As this participant revealed:

> I think there is a natural human … behaviour that we see people seem to be sometimes reactive to that type of events, more than – and when it happens, or when it happens with industry, then that's when it starts, "Okay, things need to change." And I think it's a lot of things in our society is a lot like that, unfortunately. So, I think we're still more being in a reactive mode, rather than a proactive. (Man RP17)

Some participants also reflected on WTFSH being misidentified as bullying. As this comment reflects:

> The way that our complaints, to date, have come in around these sorts of matters, would be from a bullying or a harassment point of view. We're now going to – we've always had what's called a – I think it's the workplace bullying form, and that's what people fill out, and in there you will have information. They're asked to provide three examples of behaviour or otherwise that they've experienced. In there, you would generally have information that says, "Look, I've been harassed by email. My manager sent me an email that said this." So, it would be general. (Woman RP16)

Other participants suggested that inadequate responses meant that many victims and survivors would not report, and thus experiences of WTFSH would go unrecorded:

> People who have had that happen and obviously not disclosed it, which is the common theme at the moment, is a lack of confidence in reporting. (Woman RP4)

This lack of confidence in complaints processes is not unfounded. The 2022 AHRC survey results revealed that approximately 24 per cent of those who made a formal complaint reported no consequences for the harasser and 40 per cent said that no changes occurred at their workplace as a result (AHRC, p. 14). Reporting rates are unlikely to improve until perpetrators are held to account and employers can demonstrate that they take sexual harassment seriously. Some participants indicated that victims and survivors only report WTFSH when it occurs in conjunction with face-to-face sexual harassment, abuse or bullying. Others suggested that victims and survivors might be afraid of being blamed for the harassment they have experienced and of suffering consequences as a result of reporting abuse. As this comment reflects:

> The other thing that often shocks people who – people that we're supporting – is that you can … actually try to report something, and then they get a lukewarm response … Often, it might be their manager, or – It's almost a groupthink. It's a culture that's been created, and even the manager of the manager chimes in. So, there are very problematic workplace cultures. (Woman RP4)

This fear appears to be well founded with the most recent AHRC survey, also finding that people who reported workplace sexual harassment faced negative consequences including being ostracised, victimised or ignored by colleagues (13%), resigning (13%) or being labelled a troublemaker (12%; 2022, p. 14).

Some participants recounted that victims and survivors may be reluctant to report WTFSH because they blame themselves. As RP2 recounted, "The first thing women will say is, 'What did I do?' Or, 'I don't think I did anything to cause this'" (Woman RP2). Alternatively, they may feel that they're unlikely to be believed or supported: "I'm not going to be supported here" (Woman RP13).

The blurring of personal and professional digital communications and networking channels also leads to a lack of clarity and understanding of WTFSH, for example, when WTFSH extends beyond harassment between co-workers and involves clients or even members of the general public. Some research participants discussed this in relation to the harassment that people, notably

journalists, experience due to the public nature of their jobs. As these statements reflect, participants reported that this harassment is prevalent, particularly among women journalists, and that perpetrators generally come from outside the journalists' place of work:

> Female journalists receive a real array of online abuse and it's mainly from the audience as opposed to sort of internal. ... Rather than sort of online sexual harassment coming from colleagues, what I see is really more from the audience themselves … 75 per cent of what crosses my desk is directed at female journalists. So, that's quite obviously gendered. (Woman RP15)

> We do a lot of work in the media space with journalists. And they're obviously one cohort that … experience huge rates of sexual harassment through technology. And that cuts across their public professional profiles, into their personal lives as well. (Woman RP1)

Others discussed WTFSH regarding industries involving clients:

> Thinking about most of the [legal] matters that I've considered, it [the perpetrator] would be something like a member of the public, a customer, or someone that's, like in-home care, or a client. (Woman RP16)

Participants described how some industries are more at risk of WTFSH from customers or clients, for example, massage therapists who can receive harassment from clients who mistakenly assume they are sex workers:

> I'm in a clinic with seven other practitioners and only one of them is male. So, my industry is dominated by females. … And particularly anyone who is in what I would call a body workspace, so they're doing massage, even osteopathy and chiropractors. They don't get as much of it, but there's still that if you're an attractive female in that area you're still copping [a lot] online socially. (Woman RP13)

Some participants recounted that sex workers, and those working with them, also report high levels of WTFSH from clients and anti-sex work campaigners, who can be located outside Australia, making responses to the harassment even more challenging:

> The biggest one that we find our support team gets hit with is gore. So, for example, if we don't respond to a client wanting to take down a worker [from an escort directory] … we can sometimes get hit with just emails of a lot of different gore-related stuff … When we first started [redacted sex work-friendly social platform] in 2018, one of the developers was … – because they were transgender, they were doxed. So, one of the things we actively do is we don't actually list anyone in terms of our team; we give people pseudonyms and we very specifically state, when we onboard people, do not mention that you work with us at all, because we can't guarantee safety.
> (Non-binary & not revealed RP11 & RP12)

Drivers

Participants identified a range of factors that align with the drivers of other forms of gender-based violence in considering what contributes to WTFSH perpetration, with some participants suggesting that while the "method" of the perpetration differs, the intent is the same:

> I think it's very risky for technology-facilitated sexual harassment to be conceptualised as something different or novel or unique. It is still sexual harassment. It's just delivered through a different medium and it's no less important or the experience of it is no less meaningful or awful simply because it happens through your phone or through Facebook from one of your colleagues. (Woman RP8)

Misogyny and gender stereotypes, particularly regarding masculinity and power (and the fear of losing it), were often characterised as primary causes, as these participants explained:

> There is no question that there is definitely a silencing of women's voices … There is absolutely a misogynistic element there where it's a real attack to try and get a particular message out, their own opinion out, and the way to do that is to attack the individual. (Woman RP2)

> Everyone has seen [the] mining [industry] has been under the spotlight around sexual harassment. I think male-dominated industries tend to see a bit more of

> that type of behaviour, unfortunately. But also, I think in some industries where just some of the leaders, or the leading position, or positions of powers are more male, we also see that type of behaviour. And I think some organisations, where they're a bit more hierarchical … they're not a flat organisation. There's top management, middle management, and the way they structure, it's a bit more old-fashioned. Then I will say you can see that type of behaviour. (Man RP17)

Another participant described a range of situations and power imbalances that can mean that some people, particularly those from minoritised and marginalised communities, are at increased risk of WTFSH:

> It might be the circumstances that somebody finds themselves in. It might be that they're not junior but that they're new. It might be that they don't speak the language proficiently or English as a first language, and that has an impact on power imbalances. They may be away from home, so we have a lot of people who've been sexually harassed and assaulted as well, dependent upon the client, in FIFO [fly-in fly-out] settings. If somebody doesn't have a lot of supports around them – for example, either because they've moved from overseas to relocate to an office here, or because they're in a fly-in fly-out situation – that will increase risk. (Woman RP4)

While recognising power as a driving factor, most of the research participants' examples or case studies of WTFSH did not involve power imbalances, which perhaps highlights how rarely such cases are reported. Other participants felt that the omnipresence of technology in all aspects of our lives makes it easier to step over the line between appropriate and inappropriate behaviour:

> As a team, we've talked about the accidental trolls. Do you accidentally find yourself on a bandwagon that you thought, no, I didn't mean to go quite so down that road but I do have views, but I didn't mean for it to be personal and suddenly I'm caught up in it. (Woman RP2)

> Technology just allows that inappropriateness to flourish a little bit more. (Woman RP1)

However, in a similar vein to some of the earlier comments, this stepping over the line was viewed as being more likely within the context of male-dominated work environments, an issue also identified in the survey as reported in the next section:

> Coming back to what I said about those cultures of masculinity that sort of platform or reward aggressive dominant behaviour, certainly we've seen that [harassment is] more likely to happen in an online space where they don't understand boundaries. Or again, it comes back to that broader understanding around what is appropriate, and what is not appropriate. (Woman RP1)

Some participants observed that male-dominated workplaces also create an environment in which women will engage in harassment and other inappropriate behaviours to fit in:

> There's very rigid and unfavourable gender stereotypes that inform and shape how people view interactions between men and women, and the other side of this, actually, it's coming out in some observations where women are also engaging in fairly offensive and extreme behaviour where they're trying to fit into predominantly male workforces as well. (Woman RP3)

Poor culture and leadership were commonly seen as driving WTFSH, especially workplace cultures where poor behaviours, including sexual harassment, are accepted or minimised and where leaders either do not prioritise appropriate values and behaviours or where their actions run counter to their words and espoused values:

> At a workplace, when we investigate sexual harassment, there are instances where it's a level of poor communication and poor management that leads to instances of sexual harassment. So, a lack of emotional maturity and emotional intelligence, which creates an environment where predominantly management and senior leaders engage in language that meets the definition of sexual harassment. So, whether that is sort of lude jokes or discriminatory language or forms of misogyny, the lack of knowledge, understanding and ignorance in management is often something that we observe through our investigations. (Man RP18)

Harms

A defining characteristic of WTFSH commonly reflected on by participants was the inescapable, boundaryless nature and how the harassment can start in the workplace but spread into people's private lives. As these participants explained:

> Probably the key kind of difference in terms of how people experience technology-facilitated sexual harassment is that it can come home with them in more ways than if you're just experiencing it at work. Which can be really violating. (Woman RP1)

> I mean, this is 24 hours a day, right? This isn't limited to just when you're in the workplace and particularly with people working more from home and not being in an environment where you're around people. (Woman RP8)

As a result, it can be subtle and difficult to prove, as well as invisible to others and, thus, isolating. Some participants felt the WTFSH could, in some ways, feel more inescapable than in-person workplace sexual harassment:

> I think because it's about that reach, and I think it's about that extra dimension. If you have – and unless you block – phone numbers, or unless you hide a profile, say if it's through Facebook or so forth, then people can find you in this day and age. So, I think it's about closing off those boundaries, I think. If it's work-related emails, and the perpetrator persists in emailing you at all times and all hours and you don't know what you're going to open, but you need to use that vehicle for your work, then I do think that would certainly instil a sense of fear in individuals. If they can't leave their work because they need their income, then that would be a sense of entrapment, I would think. (Woman RP16)

Yet participants' views were divided regarding the "seriousness" of WTFSH and its perpetration. Some participants felt that it was something that anyone could engage in, as it was easy to step over the line from acceptable to unacceptable behaviour, and that what is unacceptable isn't always obvious (i.e. behaviours can be open to interpretation). As one participant reflected:

> These [cases of WTFSH] are often from colleagues who take that step too far, and I think for me this is the key messaging, that we're all capable of this. This is about us really thinking about what will I say online? How might someone take this online? What's appropriate and what's not? I think we're all coming to grips with trying to think about, how do we interact online in a way that is respectful all the time? (Woman RP2)

Others similarly described how WTFSH is often minimised:

> The professional repercussions from speaking out about when they experience these kinds of forms of harassment, because they're "making a fuss", or they're "hard to work with", or they're just being "overly sensitive", that kind of thing. (Woman RP1)

In contrast, other participants viewed WTFSH as highly malicious and violent, with the further potential to result in in-person violence:

> It just can creep into every corner of your life when we carry our phones around as much as we do. I think it's the fact that you maybe don't know who the person is or where they are can be frightening as well. You don't know what is – and it's sort of, is this a real threat? Where is this person? And something I always say to journalists is it's not for you to make the call. I think for a long time we really minimised, say, online death threats or rape threats and said, "It's just the Internet." (Woman RP15)

Some participants who worked closely with victims and survivors also reported that victimisation, much like other forms of technology-facilitated abuse (Flynn et al., 2022, 2023a), could lead to self-harm and PTSD:

> I mean, harms are the psychological distress, self-harm, that sort of severe injury. That goes without saying. Still vivid, even talking to one person last year, that level of considering self-harm, attempted self-harm, that's the most extreme. Many have access to support. But that kind of injury is the worst. Not being able to concentrate at work, not having trust in your colleagues, or the people that you report to. I think that erosion of confidence, which people might not necessarily see as an injury, but I think it leads to that anxiety in the workplace. (Woman RP16)

In some cases, participants described how victimisation could carry over from online to "IRL" (in real life), and as a result RP15 reported that:

> A lot of what we see doesn't necessarily go offline, but we take every threat as though it could, because I think you absolutely have to. (Woman RP15)

Revealing the misogyny that can underpin WTFSH, two participants reported that journalists, particularly women journalists and those reporting on issues related to gender (such as domestic and family violence and the gender pay gap), are particularly vulnerable to threats of physical violence. These participants identified that such threats can have a "chilling" effect, meaning that the harassment effectively silences women and leads them to remove themselves from online spaces and the public sphere to avoid harassment. As this participant observed:

> The biggest impact, and actually it's also one of the biggest drivers of online abuse, is silencing. So, online abuse, and particularly when you look at where it's distributed, really aims to silence certain parts of the population. It aims to either sort of scare that journalist but also to signal to other journalists that if you're going to be a woman, say, reporting about women's rights, that's the highest risk topic that you can be reporting on. And, so, that signals to journalists, if you want to report on this, then this is – we're going to come for you in this way. And it's unfortunately again really, really effective. (Woman RP15)

This chilling effect was further identified as compromising victims' and survivors' careers, businesses, income and professional reputations:

> I've seen people pull off social completely which is really damaging for their businesses. And in our industry taking a sabbatical because of crap on social media has become almost a thing: social media detox … And then I've seen people who are really – they're mentally unwell because of what they've [experienced]. (Woman RP13)

Responses to WTFSH

Responsibility

Participants had mixed views regarding responsibility, particularly regarding technology providers and platforms. Some felt strongly that technology companies must ensure that the users of their platforms are safe. Others felt less confident that platforms could do much to prevent WTFSH and other forms of online abuse. These comments reflect some of these views:

> Organisations have a huge amount of responsibility for doing as much as they can to prevent – especially sort of intra-office harassment, so colleagues sabotaging and harassing each other is absolutely – that is a workplace OH&S [occupational health and safety] issue clearly. But then beyond that there's a responsibility on – a lot of people I think I've spoken to really want to put a lot of blame on platforms but the more I read about platform regulation, the less clear I am about what that would actually look like. (Woman RP5)

> I saw this in the [de-identified] sector time and time again ... "Well, it's a criminal matter. We can't deal with it as a workplace." That is wrong. Because I know many workplaces like [Australian bank] … they have some really tight policies and procedures around how do we actually deal with perpetrators, how do we conduct an investigation if you've determined that you have – someone has actually breached your code of conduct. (Woman RP8)

However, most participants agreed that employers could and must do more to prevent such behaviour. In particular, employers must invest in developing positive workplace cultures where inappropriate behaviours are not tolerated. Employer representatives also wanted more support and guidance from the government, particularly in dealing with perpetrators and on privacy and confidentiality issues.

Challenges

Research participants identified many challenges in responding to WTFSH. One key challenge was ensuring perpetrator accountability. Many participants stated that employer responses in relation to perpetrators either tended to be non-existent or over the top (often because inappropriate workplace behaviours had been allowed to continue for too long). Interestingly, while it was clear in some of the interviews that many perpetrators cannot be identified as they are essentially anonymous online trolls, the issue of anonymity in the online space seemed to be accepted as inevitable. Another challenge was assuring victims and survivors and other employees that action had been taken without breaching privacy. As these participants explained:

> I think a lot of corporates, they have more power than they think they do as workplaces and certainly, in my previous gig when I worked in the [de-identified sector] … they don't know how to deal with perpetrators, right, because it's all like, "Oh, it's very tricky. If we do actually deal with them, we can't say anything publicly for privacy reasons." (Woman RP8)

> So, you do see workplaces that – and obviously for privacy issues, they can't be telling the victim. The business is looking after everybody, so you do see perpetrators leave because they feel that they've been hard done by, or the victim leaves because they feel that nothing was done, but that's because the business can't necessarily tell them, but overall, the workplace has a duty to all workers. (Woman RP16)

Other key challenges identified in responding to WTFSH were a lack of general awareness and a legal clarity regarding what constitutes WTFSH, as these comments indicate:

> People [harassers] may think that they're engaging in conduct that is not work related, but in fact has a very clear connection to the people they work with and work, and in a lot of cases would amount to unlawful conduct under the Sex Discrimination Act. (Woman RP3)

> I think, you know, a very broad challenge is that the legal framework probably doesn't specify, specifically enough, what constitutes tech-facilitated sexual harassment. (Woman RP1)

Relatedly, participants also reflected on the difficulties of definitions and enforcement keeping up with perpetrators and technologies in responding to WTFSH when "Technology changes really quickly" (Man RP18).

Participants felt that the absence of clarity or regulation also suggested WTFSH has not been prioritised by government or employers, creating barriers in responses. As one participant observed:

> There are financial barriers. There's sort of resources and financial barriers that prevent organisations from feeling like they have the – yeah, the resources required to respond … there's also a sort of political will I suppose. And I'd say that when it comes to things like prevention and talking to young people about not just sexual harassment in workplaces but also what sexual harassment is more broadly … there has been a real resistance to doing anything that would systematically change the status quo. (Woman RP5)

The absence of data regarding prevalence and perpetration also contributes to difficulties in understanding best practices in responding to WTFSH:

> We only will know as much [about the perpetrator] as the complainant has volunteered to provide us that information. So typically, what we'll get is information about the content of the material, where it's hosted, the behaviours that they're experiencing but whether or not they disclose to us they know each other from the workplace or are colleagues, it's completely up to the complainant and a lot of them won't actually disclose. (Woman RP6)

This was similarly linked to concerns around the low reporting of WTFSH, with participants suggesting that victims and survivors blame themselves or fear being blamed or punished for reporting and thus do not report WTFSH. If they do want to report, there can be a multitude of avenues for reporting, which is overwhelming:

> I think it's a level of education and awareness. What do I take to whom? Do I take it to police, do I take it to Anti-Discrimination, do I take it to the Human Rights Commission, do I take it to the workplace regulator? Do I lodge a worker's compensation claim and leave it at that? What do I do? (Woman RP16)

Participants also noted that securing evidence could complicate responses, and none of the research participants were aware of any prosecutions in response to WTFSH:

> We haven't prosecuted anyone … and the reason for that is we see injured workers drop out, or not be able to provide enough evidence, and we see the workplaces not necessarily – in many cases, it becomes like a he said, she said, or person against person. It doesn't necessarily have to be a he or she. I've seen matters where it's he and he. But the evidence is not there to support – for example, we can issue an improvement notice, where the workplace needs to make changes to their systems or working environment to address the risk to health and safety. Sometimes there's not enough evidence to even get us that far, and then sometimes you have workers who are not willing to be witnesses in a court of law. So, we can take things a certain distance, but nothing's gone to prosecution. (Woman RP16)

Unhelpful responses

Several participants identified an issue with technology-facilitated abuse, including WTFSH, being seen as a technology issue rather than a behavioural or cultural issue. As a result, in some cases, technological solutions were the focus of responses but did not address the root causes of WTFSH, including gender inequality and gendered stereotypes and social norms (Citron, 2009; Henry & Powell, 2015; Henry et al., 2020). As this comment reflects:

> It feels too simple for me at this point to say that social media are responsible … gender equity and gender equality is a preventative measure in terms of dealing with workplace tech-facilitated sexual harassment. (Woman RP5)

Other participants reported that organisations could often address issues like WTFSH as a tick-the-box exercise, doing the bare minimum, and that this is an approach that is unlikely to be effective:

> Workplaces, most of them or the big corporates, might have a little webinar or something like that they have to click through, and they don't really have to pay attention to it. (Woman RP4)

Some participants also reported that social media platforms prioritise free speech at the expense of individual safety and that they have a responsibility to ensure that their content standards reflect community standards:

> We're in the moment of trying to meet in that space where we're trying to collectively understand what is acceptable and what's not. That's where social media companies really have an important job to play because they need to reflect what society is saying and those things that, as a society, we're starting to come to grips with … I feel like they're not always quite as fast at doing that, and they always err on the side of free speech, which is the safety net for them to say, well, you can say what you want to say. (Woman RP2)

Helpful responses

Several stakeholder research participants highlighted the need to close the loop and communicate action taken on WTFSH while safeguarding confidentiality. They suggested ways of doing this, including discussing how investigations will be undertaken and action taken during induction or training. In describing helpful responses, stakeholders identified the following key aims:

- The majority of stakeholders – from technology platforms and online safety organisations to industry peaks and women's safety organisations – identified leadership from the top of organisations (leadership sets the tone) as essential to demonstrate that WTFSH is an organisational issue. Leaders need to close the loop (walk the talk) and demonstrate that action will be and is being taken (while also protecting confidentiality).
- A range of stakeholders identified the need for holistic responses (e.g. not "just" training).
- Stakeholders from online safety organisations, media organisations, regulatory agencies, technology platforms and women's safety organisations highlighted that trauma-informed responses are essential – participants raised how damaging insensitive and harmful responses can be and how often victims and survivors may have experienced other forms of abuse in their lives and thus find WTFSH deeply distressing.
- Stakeholders agreed that empowerment of victims and survivors is vital, including the development of tools to support them (such as online tools) and actions taken against perpetrators. Many participants, from women's safety organisations and technology platforms, reported that victims and survivors rarely want to take legal or police action; they want the behaviour to stop, to be safe and for the perpetrator to be reprimanded.
- Stakeholders identified the need for intersectional responses that recognise that some groups may be more likely to be victimised than others.

- Stakeholders felt that platform developers and IT teams need to adopt safety-by-design principles to ensure user safety is prioritised and built into all new systems.
- Stakeholders posited that a positive culture must be worked on, invested in and developed over time.
- Stakeholders, including regulators, identified that legislation is required to guide or direct employer action and clarify what constitutes inappropriate behaviour.
- Stakeholders identified the need for primary prevention – addressing the root causes of the issue is critical.
- Stakeholders further identified the need for co-production of policies and responses with victims and survivors and other experts.

Education and awareness

Participants overwhelmingly felt that while awareness of WTFSH is growing, understanding of its harms and consequences is still too low. Most participants were also in agreement that WTFSH should be one component of broader training and other actions regarding workplace sexual harassment and bullying: "Whatever is done to educate about tech-facilitated sexual harassment – it all should be placed in that broader context of, 'This is a community/global issue around gender equity and attitudes towards women,' it should be built within that context" (Woman RP14) and "The drivers are the same, it's just a different tool" (Woman RP4).

Case studies were also emphasised as a valuable tool for highlighting what comprises inappropriate behaviour and ways to respond to it, "So that people are able to identify it, and name it, and then be able to respond because one of the difficult things is when we're immersed in that culture, or those environments all the time, especially as women, we can just think it's the norm and not easily identify it as something that is harmful to us, or unacceptable" (Woman RP14). Participants also identified that resources need to be relevant to the workplace context, "Clear, concise, practical information, online and accessible, that doesn't have to be rebranded for everybody, but provides case study examples of what's appropriate and what's not appropriate" (Woman RP16).

Many participants emphasised that the prevention of WTFSH and development of positive workplace cultures needs to be led from the top and that leaders' actions need to reflect their words. Participants also generally agreed that training and awareness raising needs to happen at all levels of the organisation "from the top down", reflecting that it is an organisational issue and shared responsibility and that it needs to be tailored to the different responsibilities that people at different levels have:

> Everybody [needs training]. But you need to be – it's not exactly the same education that you're going to get if you're a team leader or managing a large team, because you have a different responsibility. So, it needs to be contextualised to your level of leadership and how many people you manage within your team. But everyone should get some form of training around that. (Man RP17)

> We have to start with leaders first. I think we absolutely have to start with leaders. But you can't just do it [training] with leaders and HR staff, you have to do it with the whole organisation. (Woman RP4)

Similarly, some argued that HR may not be best placed to lead this work and that it may be more powerful being led by someone senior with responsibility for organisational risk management.

Participants also identified the need for bystander training, although it was not necessarily referred to as bystander training but rather as the need for the development cultures that support speaking up:

> I think workplaces need to develop training and resources that help other people in the workplace both identify and be able to name and respond to sexual harassment that they see. So, whether it's responding in terms of notifying the responsible people to do something, or if it's in a low level, or a thing they can respond to directly, that they are able to do that and know that they'd be supported by the organisation to do so. (Woman RP14)

Indeed, several participants highlighted the difficulty of speaking up when someone else said something "a bit off" and identified the need for training to define and practice bystander actions. One participant expressed remorse at not having spoken up in the past and contributing to a culture that effectively supported perpetrators:

> I think it's about understanding that we're all victims of a culture that accepts too much of these behaviours, or comments, et cetera. And I, as a 50-odd-year-old woman, still get caught by that not wanting to make a scene, or not trusting my judgement that, "Oh, that's a bit icky," or not wanting to make everybody else feel bad in that experience by picking out someone and saying, "Hang on, that's not okay to say that?" those sorts of things. So, to have training, or resources that would help people to feel able to intervene, or to know what to say, or to do it possibly in light-hearted responses if it's the minor stuff, but ways that make it really clear that that's not okay that behaviour. (Woman RP14)

The next section of the report describes the findings from Stage 2 of the research, which comprised a survey of engagement in WTFSH, as well as in-person workplace sexual harassment, among adult Australians who had undertaken either paid or voluntary work within the last 15 years (since 1 July 2007).

Stage 2: Survey of engagement in workplace technology-facilitated sexual harassment

In this section, we report on several key themes within the survey findings, namely: the extent of disclosed engagement in workplace sexual harassment (both technology-facilitated and in-person behaviours); the nature of workplace sexual harassing behaviours (both technology-facilitated and in-person); characteristics of victims and survivors of WTFSH; workplace characteristics and responses to WTFSH; and finally, the overall significant predictors of engagement in WTFSH.

Extent of disclosed engagement in workplace sexual harassment

Overall, we found that 1 in 4 (24.8%, *n* = 830) Australians surveyed self-reported ever having engaged in any workplace sexual harassment behaviour – whether via technologies or in person. These rates of workplace sexual harassment behaviour were significantly higher for men compared with women, with 1 in 3 men (33.5%, *n* = 526) reporting ever having engaged in any workplace sexual harassment behaviour, as compared to 1 in 6 women (17.1%, *n* = 304).

Engaging in WTFSH (1 in 7, 14.9%, *n* = 498) was less commonly reported by respondents, than face-to-face or in-person behaviours (1 in 5, 22.7%, *n* = 759). Men were significantly more likely than women to report ever engaging in face-to face sexual harassment (men: 31.0%, *n* = 486; women: 15.4%, *n* = 273) and were also significantly more likely to report having ever engaged in WTFSH (men: 23.9%, *n* = 375; women: 6.9%, *n* = 123, see Table 3).

Table 3: Extent of workplace sexual harassment ever engaged in, by gender

	Women		Men		Total, within sample	
	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*
Technology-facilitated sexual harassment[a]	6.9	*123*	23.9	*375*	14.9	*498*
Face-to-face sexual harassment[a]	15.4	*273*	31.0	*486*	22.7	*759*
Both technology-facilitated and face-to-face sexual harassment[a]	2.8	*92*	10.0	*335*	12.8	*427*
Total, any workplace sexual harassment[a]	17.1	*304*	33.5	*526*	24.8	*830*

Note: [a] denotes significant difference, by gender ($p < .001$)

A smaller proportion of survey respondents reported having ever engaged in both technology and in-person workplace sexual harassment (1 in 8, 12.8%, *n* = 427).

Again, men were significantly more likely than women to have done so (men: 1 in 10, 10.0%, *n* = 335; women: 1 in 34, 2.8%, *n* = 92).

Nature of workplace sexual harassment behaviours

As reported above, men were significantly more likely than women to report lifetime workplace sexual harassment engagement in person (men: 31.0%, *n* = 486; women: 15.4%, *n* = 273). Among the more common in-person sexually harassing behaviours self-reported were: sexually suggestive comments or jokes; sexual staring or leering; sexual bodily gestures; unwelcome touching or cornering; and repeated invitations to go out on dates (see Table 4). Men were significantly more likely than women to report engaging in these behaviours for all items except three (uninvited physical contact, unwelcome hugging or kissing, and "other").

Table 4: Nature of in-person workplace sexually harassing behaviours ever engaged in, by gender

	Women		Men		Total, within sample	
	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*
Unwelcome touching or cornering[a]	3.0	*54*	6.6	*104*	4.7	*158*
Sexual staring or leering[a]	2.4	*42*	8.9	*140*	5.4	*182*
Sexual gestures, indecent exposure or inappropriate display of the body[a]	0.7	*12*	6.7	*105*	3.5	*117*
Sexually suggestive comments or jokes[a]	5.5	*97*	10.1	*158*	7.6	*255*
Sexually explicit pictures, posters or gifts[a]	0.7	*12*	4.7	*73*	2.5	*85*
Repeated invitations to go out on dates[a]	1.2	*21*	6.4	*100*	3.6	*121*
Intrusive questions about their private life or physical appearance[a]	1.6	*28*	4.5	*71*	3.0	*99*
Uninvited physical contact	2.9	*52*	4.5	*70*	3.6	*122*
Following, watching or loitering nearby a person[a]	1.0	*18*	3.6	*57*	2.2	*75*
Requests or pressure for sex or other sexual acts[a]	0.2	*4*	2.6	*41*	1.3	*45*
Touched, or attempted to touch, their genital region whether under or over their clothes[a]	0.4	*7*	1.7	*26*	1.0	*33*
Unwelcome hugging or kissing	3.3	*59*	3.2	*50*	3.3	*109*
Other unwelcome behaviour of a sexual nature	2.3	*40*	3.2	*50*	2.7	*90*
Any, in-person sexual harassment[a]	15.4	*273*	31.0	*486*	22.7	*759*

Note: [a] denotes significant difference, by gender ($p < .001$)

Among the more common technology-facilitated sexually harassing behaviours engaged in were: sending someone sexually suggestive comments or jokes; making sexually explicit comments via technologies (such as emails, SMS messages or on social media); repeated invitations to go out on dates; and making sexually explicit phone calls (see Table 5). For all items except one ("other"), men were significantly more likely than women to report engaging in these sexually harassing behaviours.

Table 5: Nature of WTFSH behaviours ever engaged in, by gender

	Women		Men		Total, within sample	
	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*
Made sexually explicit phone calls, including leaving an explicit message on voicemail[a]	1.2	*22*	7.7	*120*	4.2	*142*
Made sexually explicit comments in emails, SMS messages or on social media[a]	2.0	*35*	8.5	*134*	5.1	*169*
Engaged in repeated sexual advances on email, social networking websites or internet chat rooms[a]	1.2	*22*	6.4	*101*	3.7	*123*
Sent them sexually suggestive comments or jokes[a]	3.6	*64*	9.2	*145*	6.2	*209*
Sent them sexually explicit pictures, posters or gifts[a]	1.7	*30*	5.1	*80*	3.3	*110*
Made repeated invitations to go out on dates[a]	1.4	*24*	7.8	*122*	4.4	*146*
Asked intrusive questions about their private life or physical appearance[a]	1.9	*33*	5.5	*87*	3.6	*120*
Sent someone you work with requests or pressure for sex or other sexual acts[a]	0.7	*13*	3.6	*56*	2.1	*69*
Taken or created an intimate image or video of them without their consent[a]	0.8	*15*	3.0	*47*	1.9	*62*
Shared or threatened to share intimate images or video of them without their consent[a]	0.7	*13*	2.0	*32*	1.3	*45*
Any other unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature that occurred online or via some form of technology	2.9	*52*	3.6	*57*	3.3	*109*
Any, WTFSH[a]	6.9	*123*	23.9	*375*	14.9	*498*

Note: [a] denotes significant difference, by gender ($p < .001$)

A majority of respondents who disclosed engaging in WTFSH also said that the most recent incident was a "one-off" (60.6%, $n = 300$), rather than engaging in related behaviours towards the same person more than once (30.1%, $n = 149$). Furthermore, of those who reported engaging in WTFSH, 57.2 per cent ($n = 285$) said that the most recent incident occurred after 1 March 2020 (and thus as COVID-19 pandemic measures began to be applied in Australia); and 36.5 per cent ($n = 182$) of respondents said that the most recent incident "definitely" or "probably" occurred around the time that they were working from home.

Those respondents who had engaged in WTFSH (*n* = 498) were further asked about the nature of digital devices or apps used in their most recent incident of engaging in WTFSH (as shown in Table 6). Respondents most commonly said that they had used work email (31.1%, *n* = 155), their personal phone or mobile (29.1%, *n* = 145), personal email (26.5%, *n* = 132), or their work phone or mobile (24.7%, *n* = 123) in the most recent incident.

Women who engaged in WTFSH were most likely to report using their personal phone or mobile (36.6%, *n* = 45), while men most commonly reported using work email (34.7%, *n* = 130) and personal email (30.1%, *n* = 113). This suggests that WTFSH more likely occurred via email and phone (including calls or SMS) rather than, for example, via social media, video conferencing or personal chat platforms.

Table 6: Nature of digital devices or apps used in most recent incident of WTFSH

	Women *(n = 123)*		Men *(n = 375)*		Total, within subset *(n = 498)*	
	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*
Work email[a]	20.3	*25*	34.7	*130*	31.1	*155*
Personal email[a]	15.4	*19*	30.1	*113*	26.5	*132*
Work phone or mobile (including calls or SMS)[a]	12.2	*15*	28.8	*108*	24.7	*123*
Personal phone or mobile (including calls or SMS)[a]	36.6	*45*	26.7	*100*	29.1	*145*
Work video communication platform (such as Zoom, MS Teams, Skype)[a]	8.1	*10*	17.9	*67*	15.5	*77*
Personal video communication platform (such as Zoom, MS Teams, Skype)[a]	8.9	*11*	15.5	*58*	13.9	*69*
Work account on a chat platform (such as Slack, MS Teams)[a]	11.4	*14*	14.7	*55*	13.9	*69*
Personal social media account (such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn)[a]	16.3	*20*	18.7	*70*	18.1	*90*
Personal account on a chat platform (such as WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger)	16.3	*20*	11.2	*42*	12.4	*62*
Other work account or device	0.8	*1*	1.9	*7*	1.6	*8*
Other personal account or device	7.3	*9*	4	*15*	4.8	*24*

Note: [a] denotes significant difference, by gender ($p < .001$)

Participants who had engaged in any WTFSH were also asked about their feelings at the time of the most recent incident, as reported in Table 7. Overall, a majority of people who had engaged in WTFSH said that they "thought the person was okay with it" (51.5%, *n* = 256) in their most recent incident. Among the other most common responses were that they "thought the person would be flattered" (44.6%, *n* = 222), that they "thought it was funny" (42.0%, *n* = 209), or that they "wanted to pursue a sexual or other personal relationship with them" (40.8%, *n* = 203).

Table 7: Nature of feelings at the time of most recent incident, as disclosed by those engaging in WTFSH

	Women *(n = 123)*		Men *(n = 375)*		Total, within subset *(n = 498)*	
"Very" or "Extremely"	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*
I thought it was funny[a]	13.8	*17*	51.2	*192*	42.0	*209*
I thought the person would be flattered[a]	21.9	*27*	52.0	*195*	44.6	*222*
I thought the person was okay with it[a]	38.2	*47*	55.8	*209*	51.5	*256*
I wanted to pursue a sexual or other personal relationship with them[a]	18.7	*23*	48.0	*180*	40.8	*203*
I wanted to annoy the person[a]	10.6	*13*	38.1	*143*	31.3	*156*
I wanted to humiliate them[a]	9.8	*12*	37.1	*139*	30.3	*151*
I wanted to hurt their feelings[a]	9.8	*12*	37.1	*139*	30.3	*151*
I wanted to express my anger towards them[a]	5.7	*7*	38.7	*145*	30.5	*152*
I wanted to frighten them[a]	6.5	*8*	38.1	*143*	30.3	*151*

Note: [a] denotes significant difference, by gender ($p < .001$)

Survey participants were less likely to acknowledge negative feelings towards the victim and survivor at the time of their most recent incident of engaging in WTFSH. However, more than 1 in 4 said that they wanted to "annoy" the victim and survivor (31.1%, *n* = 156), express their "anger" towards the victim and survivor (30.5%, *n* = 152), "humiliate" the victim and survivor (30.3%, *n* = 151), or "frighten" them (30.3%, *n* = 151). There were also significant gender differences in the levels of agreement with the feelings items. Overall, men were both significantly more likely than women to "very" and/or "extremely" agree to experiencing minimising feelings at the time (such as thinking it was funny, the person would be flattered or be okay with it), and men were more likely than women to "very" and/or "extremely" agree to experiencing negative feelings towards the victim and survivor at the time (as shown in Table 7).

Characteristics of victims and survivors of WTFSH

Survey respondents who disclosed engaging in WTFSH were asked a series of questions about the characteristics of the victim and survivor in their most recent incident. A majority described the victim and survivor as a man (54.3%, *n* = 269), while 39.0 per cent (*n* = 193) said that the victim and survivor was a woman (see Table 8). Men were statistically significantly more likely to have engaged in WTFSH behaviour towards a woman victim and survivor in their last incident (men: 41.9%, *n* = 157; women: 29.3%, *n* = 36), while men and women were statistically similarly likely to have engaged in WTFSH behaviour towards a man.

Table 8: Characteristics of victims and survivors, as disclosed by those engaging in WTFSH

	Women *(n = 123)*		Men *(n = 375)*		Total, within subset *(n = 498)*	
	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*
Victim and survivor gender						
Woman[a]	29.3	*36*	41.9	*157*	38.8	*193*
Man	59.3	*73*	52.3	*196*	54.0	*269*
Another gender, or not sure	6.5	*8*	3.7	*14*	4.4	*22*
Prefer not to say	4.0	*5*	1.6	*6*	2.2	*11*
Victim and survivor age						
15–20 years[a]	5.7	*7*	1.9	*7*	2.8	*14*
21–30 years	19.5	*24*	20.5	*77*	20.3	*101*
31–40 years	35.8	*44*	44.3	*166*	42.2	*210*
41–50 years	15.4	*19*	22.7	*85*	20.9	*104*
51–64 years	8.9	*11*	5.9	*22*	6.6	*33*
65+ years[a]	5.7	*7*	0.5	*2*	1.8	*9*
Don't know/prefer not to say	8.9	*11*	4.3	*16*	5.4	*27*
Relationship to victim and survivor						
The head of your workplace or organisation (such as CEO, business owner or similar)[a]	4.1	*5*	24.8	*93*	19.7	*98*
Your direct manager or supervisor at work	12.2	*15*	10.1	*38*	10.6	*53*
Another manager or supervisor at work	9.8	*12*	8.5	*32*	8.8	*44*
A co-worker who was more senior than you[a]	15.4	*19*	7.5	*28*	9.4	*47*
A co-worker at the same level as you[a]	34.1	*42*	19.7	*74*	23.3	*116*
A co-worker who was more junior than you	5.7	*7*	9.1	*34*	8.2	*41*
A client or customer	4.9	*6*	6.9	*26*	6.4	*32*
Someone else associated with your workplace	6.5	*8*	9.1	*34*	8.4	*42*
Someone who provides professional services to you (e.g. therapist, wait staff)	2.4	*3*	1.6	*6*	1.8	*9*

Note: [a] denotes significant difference, by gender ($p < .001$)

With respect to the victim's and survivor's age, women participants tended to report engaging in WTFSH towards young adults (e.g. 21 to 30 years and 31 to 40 years), while men tended to report engaging in these behaviours towards young and middle-aged adults (e.g. 31 to 40 years, and 41 to 50 years); though these trends were not statistically significantly different by gender. However, it is worth noting that the small number of women engaging in WTFSH precludes reliable statistical comparisons in some smaller age categories. Notably, of those who engaged in WTFSH, men (1 in 4, 24.8%, *n* = 93) were more likely than women (1 in 20, 4.1%, *n* = 5) to do so towards the head of their workplace or organisation. Meanwhile, women (15.4%, *n* = 19) were more likely than men (7.5%, *n* = 28) to report their most recent incident of WTFSH was towards a co-worker more senior than them, with a similar trend in relation to co-workers at the same level as them (men: 19.7%, *n* = 74; women: 34.1%, *n* = 42). There were no other significant differences by gender for the self-reported relationship between the victim and survivor in the most recent incident of WTFSH.

Workplace characteristics and responses to WTFSH

Survey respondents who disclosed engaging in WTFSH were asked a series of questions about the characteristics of their workplace in the most recent incident (shown in Table 9). It was most common, among those who had engaged in WTFSH, for their workplace to be a large (42.6%, *n* = 212) or mid-sized organisation (31.5%, *n* = 157), rather than a smaller workplace (25.7%, *n* = 128). It was also most common for the workplace gender composition to be male-dominated (44.9%, *n* = 220), or to have roughly equal numbers of men and women (38.6%, *n* = 189), rather than a woman-dominated workplace (16.3%, *n* = 80). Respondents were also asked about their perception of the occurrence of sexual harassment more broadly within their workplace. Most answered that it "occurred sometimes" (32.1%, *n* = 160), or was "very rare" (29.7%, *n* = 148), signalling that their own self-disclosed behaviour was not (in their own perception at least) reflective of a broader occurrence of sexual harassment in their workplace.

Table 9: Characteristics of workplaces, as disclosed by those engaging in WTFSH

	Women *(n = 123)*		Men *(n = 375)*		Total, within subset *(n = 498)*	
	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*
Size of organisation						
1–4	6.7	*12*	9.8	*25*	7.4	*37*
5–19	23.8	*29*	16.5	*62*	18.3	*91*
20–199	35.2	*43*	30.4	*114*	31.5	*157*
200 or more[b]	31.1	*38*	46.4	*174*	42.6	*212*
Gender composition						
Mainly men[a]	28.3	*34*	50.4	*186*	44.9	*220*
Mainly women[a]	28.3	*34*	12.5	*46*	16.3	*80*
Roughly equal	43.3	*52*	37.1	*137*	38.6	*189*
Perceived culture of sexual harassment						
Very rare[a]	22.0	*27*	32.3	*121*	29.7	*148*
Rare	22.8	*28*	18.9	*71*	19.8	*99*
Occurred sometimes	35.8	*44*	30.9	*116*	32.1	*160*
Common	12.2	*15*	10.1	*38*	10.6	*53*
Very common	7.3	*9*	7.7	*29*	7.6	*38*

Notes:
[a] denotes significant difference, by gender ($p < .001$)
[b] denotes significant difference, by gender ($p < .05$)

Overall, of those who disclosed engaging in WTFSH, it was most common for them to describe their workplace industry as "Information, Media and Telecommunications" (15%, *n* = 75), followed by "Retail Trade" (8.4%, *n* = 42), "Construction" (7.4%, *n* = 37), and "Manufacturing" (6.8%, *n* = 34); though it is worth noting that there was wide representation across many industries (see Appendix A, Table A3).

Survey participants were further asked about organisational or other responses to their workplace sexually harassing behaviours. Of the 1 in 7 survey respondents (*n* = 498) who had disclosed engaging in WTFSH, less than half (38.6%, *n* = 192) said that a formal report or complaint had ever been made against them for such behaviours. Men were significantly more likely (46.7%, *n* = 172) than women (16.4%, *n* = 20) to disclose that a formal report or complaint had been made against them (see Table 10).

Table 10: Outcomes of formal complaints or reports made for WTFSH behaviours

	Women *(n = 123)*		Men *(n = 375)*		Total, within subset *(n = 498)*	
	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*
You were disciplined[a]	2.4	*3*	22.7	*85*	17.7	*88*
You were formally warned[a]	3.2	*4*	23.2	*87*	18.3	*91*
You were informally spoken to[a]	3.2	*4*	20.8	*78*	16.5	*82*
You were transferred	5.7	*7*	12.8	*48*	11.0	*55*
You had your shifts changed	7.4	*9*	9.6	*36*	9.0	*45*
You resigned[b]	0.8	*1*	7.5	*28*	5.8	*29*
You apologised	2.4	*3*	6.4	*24*	5.4	*27*
Compensation was paid to the other person	0	*0*	1.3	*5*	1.0	*5*
There were some other consequences for you	0	*0*	0.3	*1*	0.2	*1*
Total, formal report or complaint ever made[a]	16.3	*20*	45.9	*172*	38.5	*192*

Notes:
[a] denotes significant difference, by gender ($p < .001$)
[b] denotes significant difference, by gender ($p < .05$)
Percentages may not round to 100%, due to missing responses (*n* = 8) and multiple item selection.

Predictors of Self-Disclosed Engagement in WTFSH

Finally, logistic regression modelling (using the enter method) was conducted to examine the significant predictors of engagement in WTFSH, with eleven independent variables entered into the model, namely: eight demographic variables (gender, sexuality, age, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander status, LOTE, disability, geographic location, level of education); two attitudinal variables (ISHMA GEAS); and one behavioural variable (digital participation score).

Overall, the model was statistically significant X2(22, $N = 3345$) = 1123.07, $p < .001$, indicating that the model was able to distinguish between respondents who had engaged in WTFSH and those who had not. The model as a whole explained 50.1 per cent (Nagelkerke's R squared) of the variance and correctly classified 91.7 per cent of cases. Seven of the independent variables made a unique statistically significant contribution to the model, when controlling for other factors, namely: five demographic variables (gender, age, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander status, geographic location, and education); and two attitudinal variables (ISHMA and GEAS).

The strongest predictor of engagement in WTFSH was those respondents with high endorsement of sexist and gender discriminatory attitudes (GEAS), recording an odds ratio of 15.72 (see Table 11). This indicated that respondents with high endorsement of sexist and gender discriminatory attitudes were over 15 times more likely to report engagement in WTFSH than those with low endorsement of these attitudes. Additionally, those respondents with high endorsement of sexual harassment myths (ISHMA) recorded an odds ratio of 4.74, indicating that they were almost five times more likely to report engaging in WTFSH than those with low endorsement of these myths.

Table 11: Summary of predictors of WTFSH perpetration

	Odds ratio
Endorsement of sexist and gender discriminatory attitudes (GEAS)	15.72
Endorsement of sexual harassment myths (ISHMA)	4.74
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander status	4.40
Gender, men	2.37
Postgraduate qualification	1.56
Age, 35–44 years	1.43
Age, 25–34 years	1.35

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander respondents recorded an odds ratio of 4.40, indicating that these respondents had over four times greater likelihood of self-disclosed engagement in WTFSH. Additional demographic variables that were significant predictors of WTFSH were gender, with men recording an odds ratio of 2.37, indicating that men were over two times more likely than women to engage in these behaviours, while those with higher education levels with a postgraduate qualification recorded an odds ratio of 1.56. Finally, young and middle-aged adults 35 to 44 years (odds ratio 1.43) and 25 to 34 years (odds ratio 1.35) were most likely to have ever engaged in WTFSH, while with increasing age (45 and over) there was a decreasing likelihood of ever having engaged in WTFSH.

Summary

Overall, the survey findings suggest some clear trends in WTFSH, namely that it is gendered, with men more likely than women to self-report perpetration and the harassment being more likely to occur in male-dominated workplaces than female-dominated workplaces. Some further key findings included that women were more likely to report perpetrating WTFSH against young and middle-aged adults (e.g. 31 to 40 years and 41 to 50 years), while men were more likely to report perpetrating WTFSH against more senior employees or those at the same level as themselves. The data also revealed that most respondents perpetrated WTFSH in larger and mid-size organisations. While this may suggest that larger organisations are more likely to have WTFSH occur due to their size (and therefore the opportunity to harass), it may also be an indication that people are less likely to report or identify their experiences in smaller workplaces, perhaps due to an absence of policies and HR departments (see next section reporting the focus group results).

In this study, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples reported higher rates of engaging in WTFSH than non-Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples. We note that research by First Nations scholars has highlighted the often greater uptake of digital and communications technologies among Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander communities, that may in turn be implicated in experiences of various forms of technology-facilitated abuse (see e.g. Carlson & Frazer, 2021) and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people's increased risk of victimisation of online abuse (e.g. Brown et al., 2021; Carlson & Day, 2023). As such, further research is needed to investigate whether there may be confounding factors at play in the findings reported here, including, for example, cultural differences in interpreting and responding to self-reported survey research, engagement in retaliatory or resistance actions in response to received harassment, and the impacts on Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples of working in culturally unsafe environments. Importantly this project, while inclusive of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people as a demographic, was not designed with an in-depth focus on the experiences of a diversity of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander communities, and the findings should be interpreted with caution. We acknowledge the critical importance of research and data sovereignty in research that seeks to understand and respond to the experiences of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people (e.g. Trudgett et al., 2022) and that engages in Aboriginal methods of research and knowledge production (e.g. Geia et al., 2013). It is apparent that further research is needed in the field of technology-facilitated abuse, including sexual harassment, that is led by and/or co-designed with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people themselves, and this should be a priority in future Commonwealth Government-funded projects.

Most significantly, the largest predictor of WTFSH was high endorsement of sexist and gender-discriminatory attitudes and sexual harassment myths. This was combined with very low numbers of respondents stating that their behaviour had resulted in a report or sanction. Together, these findings suggest there is a significant problem with workplace culture in addressing, preventing and responding to WTFSH.

The next section of the report details the findings of Stage 3 of the research, which comprised focus groups with 28 Australians aged 18 to 39 years.

Stage 3: Focus groups

In this section, we report on several key themes that emerged from the focus groups and discussions regarding hypothetical scenarios, including: definitions of WTFSH; perceptions of the complexities of WTFSH; awareness of WTFSH policies and digital platform reporting options; and recommendations to help reduce, prevent and address WTFSH.

Defining WTFSH

Across the focus groups, participants expressed relatively consistent definitions and understandings of what constitutes WTFSH. Describing the mode of harassment, participants explained:

> It can permeate all spaces in the digital realm and through any kind of means, be it email, be it direct chat, be it video conferencing, be it teleconferencing. I think it's really diverse. (Woman 2 FG1)

> For me, it means any form of sexual harassment that occurs via a digital platform, so an electronic platform, as opposed to traditional face-to-face interactions that might have occurred in the workplace 20 years ago. (Woman 1 FG1)

Participants described the harassment as being directed toward the victim and survivor and as something that can be "between parties that don't necessarily include the victim" (Woman 1 FG1), for example, "sending sexually inappropriate messages about you to others" (Woman 5 FG5). The terms "inappropriate", "unwelcome" and "unwanted" were commonly used by participants to describe WTFSH:

> Inappropriate messages and emails. (Woman 2 FG3)

> Sexually inappropriate memes that are supposed to be funny. (Woman 5 FG5)

> Unwelcome compliments of a physical nature perhaps or asking someone out, propositioning someone to do something. (Man 1 FG2)

> It's inappropriate behaviour that's enabled through a virtual means that, on the recipient's end, it's very inappropriate, unwanted – it makes me feel so uncomfortable. (Woman 1 FG4)

> The unwanted part, I think that's the worst part about it. (Woman 2 FG4)

One of the patterns emerging across the focus group data was the changing nature of the workplace due to technology, whereby much communication can happen for work purposes in less traditional or formal outlets, such as WhatsApp, which has blurred the lines of what constitutes the workplace. As this participant reflected:

> If you have a shared work WhatsApp group like many of us do, that's somewhere where certain messages, subtle messages or direct messages, could be shared and so that's where I associate harassment. It might not be just direct to you, but also in front of other people that you work with. (Woman 2 FG1)

Remote working and working outside regular business hours, part of a lasting impact of the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, were also identified as contributing to WTFSH:

> Because working is often remote now, so it's not actually in the workplace, which I guess makes it [harassment] more prominent now via technology, as opposed to even 5 years ago. (Woman 2 FG1)

> It can be outside, definitely outside of 9 to 5, I think it can be 24/7. (Woman 3 FG1)

Participants suggested that because the changing nature of the workplace requires colleagues to interact often solely through the use of technology, as opposed to in person, it blurs the boundaries of work and professionalism, and what might be considered unprofessional or inappropriate conduct in an office setting may not be seen in the same way through digital communication, such as a text message. As this participant explained:

> I guess the parameters have expanded because technology offers a lot more opportunities for people to talk to each other and send messages. I guess people are a lot braver perhaps in front of a computer than they are in person, so that maybe they'll use technology to say things they wouldn't say in person. (Man 1, FG2)

Participants also identified the changing nature of sexual harassment due to technologies, for example, when a colleague gathers contact information through a work context and then that information is used to contact the person outside of that work context. As these participants reflected:

> I have my mobile number on the email signature, and someone can take that and then use that to message me something inappropriate. (Woman 4 FG5)

> My mobile is on my work email, and sometimes … I've received text messages, so misuse of contact information that has been not related to work, but they've obtained it through a work platform. So, inappropriate behaviour, but I guess going that extra length to actually get a personal contact number to contact you outside of a work platform through a text message. (Woman 3 FG4)

Other participants identified how perpetrators can use the technologies in the shared workplace setting, such as shared calendars among staff members, to track movements or engage in unwanted behaviours. As one participant described:

> I've had an experience where a colleague has access to my movements, so my calendar, they can see my meetings and the location of my meetings, and by doing so, they're aware of my movements and they try to – yeah, stalkerish behaviour. … So, it's through those technology platforms that they can do other things outside of work. (Woman 4, FG4)

One participant acutely described this form of WTFSH as "leveraging or using that workplace connection to then justify certain behaviour and extend that to, you know, something that's quite personal or reaching out in an unwanted way" (Woman 3 FG3).

Several participants also commented that receiving unwanted, non-work-related digital communications late at night or outside of work hours fell within their definition of WTFSH, whether the contact was specifically sexual in nature or not. The omnipresence of someone accessing you at any time outside the confines of work was described by one participant as – "bombarding into someone's private space" (Woman 7 GF5). Another participant observed:

> I feel like because we are now using a lot of different platforms, and that sort of message can be at the same period of time across different platforms; so, like someone sending the message to me … and at an inappropriate time, so late at night or something like that. So, it can be quite pressing, because you know that somehow someone is crossing the different apps to try to get in touch with you, in terms of not necessarily needing to talk about [work] things. (Woman 5 FG5)

Complexity of WTFSH

While recognising the harms of WTFSH behaviours, participants reflected on the difficulty of proving the harassment, suggesting that it could "all be explained away" (Woman 6 FG5):

> It's very hard to prove, as well, because a lot of times, sexual harassment is not black or white, and as long as he or she hasn't made it very explicit, you can always deny, and then say, "Oh, maybe that's not what I meant," and it's murky water, very hard. And also, usually every workplace will have that kind of, "We have zero tolerance against sexual harassment," but how do you define "sexual harassment", whether it is harassment or it's just normal workplace communication. (Woman 6 FG5)

Others spoke of the "nuance" of each specific incident and that in the context of communicating with colleagues via technology, "it's difficult to judge how far do you go?" (Woman 2 FG4). This was further discussed by one participant who expressed concerns about people making "a big deal out of things that really aren't [sexual harassment]" (Man 1 FG2). He explained:

> Like, if you send a message with "XX" and someone says, "Oh, that's sexual harassment," I think there should be – all sides should be common sense and people who are really genuinely just being innocent and non-harassing shouldn't be punished … but people who do cross the line repeatedly, … that's a very different story and they should have action taken against them. (Man 1 FG2)

While this participant (and some others) focused on how an individual incident may be taken out of context, others reflected on the complicated nature of sexual harassment, meaning that it often is not "one single instance, it can involve different things" (Woman 1 FG5). This continuum of harassment means that while an isolated incident or intrusion may be brushed off, either the combination of harassment experienced over time or the other factors fuelling that one incident of harassment can result in significant harm being experienced. As this participant further reflected:

> Yeah, it [a text message late at night] can be seen as pretty irrelevant, but it shows that that person has a sort of weird interest in you, and that sort of feeling could be categorised as a kind of feeling of sexual assault. (Woman 1 FG5)

The complicated nature of WTFSH was further identified by participants in relation to power dynamics. One participant reflected on power dynamics in terms of the age or status of the perpetrator and how this prevents someone from reporting. She explained:

> I think a lot of times there is a power dynamic in terms of like a boss or something like that, and I think that stops people that are younger or unsure, whatever, speaking out. … You hear stories of people where it's like a boss or something like that and it's hard for them [the victim and survivor] to come out or talk about it. (Woman 3 FG1)

To further explore the complexities of WTFSH, we provided participants with two hypothetical scenarios involving WTFSH and asked them to reflect on these. The first scenario involved a young woman (Tina), who is a casual bar attendant, experiencing WTFSH from her manager (Ben), who is a slightly older man. The victim and survivor received no support from the bar owner (Jane), who is an older woman, when Tina tried to discuss it with her. The second scenario involved an office workplace setting where a culture of sexual inappropriateness could be identified, and an employee (Kevin), who is a homosexual man, was experiencing WTFSH perpetrated by his boss (Lachlan). Details of the scenarios are provided in Table 12.

Table 12: Focus group scenarios

Scenario 1

Tina is 19 years old and works in a bar. She loves her job, although the late hours can be a bit of a pain – she has great colleagues, and they always hang out and have a drink after work. One of Tina's colleagues is Ben. Ben is a 24-year-old man, and he is one of the bar managers. Tina starts to receive unsolicited messages of a sexual nature from Ben, via Facebook Messenger, which the bar staff use to share the roster and swap shifts etc. Tina always has a laugh with Ben at work, but she finds the messages creepy and ignores them, hoping that Ben will get the message and stop sending them.

Ben continues to send Tina sexual messages, so one night after work she mentions this to the bar owner, Jane. Jane tells Tina that it's probably a joke and that Tina should raise the issue with Ben directly first. Tina tells Jane she feels uncomfortable saying anything to Ben, so Jane says to just let it go. Tina feels she has no option but to resign as she does not feel safe or supported at work.

Scenario 2

Kevin is a really charismatic and lovely person – everyone at work enjoys his company. Kevin often jokes about men who come into the office for meetings and whether or not they might be single and "his type". Kevin's boss, Lachlan, starts to send Kevin sexually explicit photos of men to his personal email account outside work hours and asks Kevin to rate them. Kevin is shocked and does not respond. One morning in the office, Lachlan asks Kevin if he has lost his sense of humour and asks why he doesn't ever respond to his emails. Kevin asks you for advice.

The scenarios sought to highlight some of the complexities of WTFSH, including power dynamics and the potential consequences of the harassment for the victim and survivor and perpetrator, and the messiness of unclear boundaries around what constitutes inappropriate behaviour. This was a deliberate decision to draw out some of the nuances, themes and discussions arising from the interview and survey research findings. The blurred boundaries in Scenario 2 were particularly challenging for participants. While many participants said they did not blame the victim and survivor (Kevin) for the perpetrator's (Lachlan) behaviour, there was a strong view expressed that Kevin was contributing to a workplace culture of sexually inappropriate behaviour, and this made challenging Lachlan's conduct more complicated:

> It sounds like that environment where there has been that banter and jokiness, and then one party's taken it too far but assumed that oh, okay, we previously had this sort of relationship. I think even Kevin's conduct is not appropriate. (Woman 1 FG1)

> This isn't to, like, put any blame on Kevin whatsoever, but where Kevin has been joking about other men that also come into the office for meetings, that's probably something that Kevin himself needs to reconsider doing as well … that's not really professional behaviour. (Woman 5 FG3)

Other participants were openly critical of Kevin's behaviour, while noting Lachlan was also behaving inappropriately; there was an implication that Lachlan's actions in non-consensually sending sexually explicit images to Kevin were almost warranted or excusable, given the workplace culture Kevin had helped create:

> Kevin often jokes about men who come into the office for meetings and whether or not they might be single and his type, so he's started this inappropriate – so he hasn't explicitly sent sexually explicit photos, he hasn't sent them, but the fact is, he's started it. So, he has initiated that culture. (Woman 1 FG4)

> Maybe Kevin needs to be more careful in future situations. (Woman 1 FG5)

There was very little recognition of the potential power dynamics in Scenario 2. Lachlan's status as Kevin's boss was rarely identified, and Kevin's sexuality was also not commonly reflected on other than to suggest Lachlan may be sexually interested in Kevin and have misinterpreted Kevin's comments, so the onus should be on Kevin to tell Lachlan directly he is not interested. It was rarely noted that the behaviour could be potentially predatory or inappropriate due to Kevin's sexuality or because of his lower status in the workplace hierarchy:

> Kevin, himself, maybe he should just take some retrospective thinking about his own behaviour, because he quite openly comments on the other guys and see whether they might be single or his type, and so his colleagues might misunderstand him about his sexual orientation. Although we don't know about his boss, Lachlan, so maybe he's interested in Kevin, sexually, but obviously Kevin is not interested in him. So, in that case, maybe in the future Kevin should restrain himself from making the same comment so as to avoid the misunderstanding. (Woman 7 FG5)

A very strong onus was placed on Kevin to express how uncomfortable the situation made him feel before further action should be taken. As these participants claimed:

> Has he told him that it makes him feel uncomfortable? Has he referred to boundaries in terms of professional relationships and things like that? (Woman 2 FG1)

> He needs to call this behaviour out as not being appropriate and something that makes him feel uncomfortable. (Woman 3 FG1)

> I think Kevin should tell Lachlan, "I don't like it, I'm sorry. It's too far." (Man 1 FG2)

These views contrasted significantly with Scenario 1, where the power dynamics between Tina and Ben were commonly acknowledged:

> Clearly there's a power imbalance here, so it would be unfair to expect Tina to take this up with Ben directly, just because he's her manager and he clearly makes a lot of the decisions and wouldn't want to be challenged in this way. (Woman 2, FG1)

> I notice that Tina is barely an adult, she is 19 years old, and the one who tried to – who is some sort of sexually harassing her is already 24 years old; that's a huge age gap, and that could be a big stress and pressing, in terms of a young girl who [is] just getting into the workplace. (Woman 1 FG1)

Similarly, there was a strong emphasis on validation and support for Tina in Scenario 1, which was less present for Kevin in Scenario 2:

> I think I would initially just validate her experience, reassure her that she's being heard, that what she's experienced either does or doesn't, but in this situation, I would think it does, constitute inappropriate behaviour. (Woman 1 FG1)

> I would believe her, and I wouldn't downplay it and say just to let it go, because it's serious. (Woman 5 FG5)

However, even in Scenario 1, where participants considered Tina to be a more ideal and a less blameworthy victim and survivor than in Scenario 2, there was a gendered element to the responses, whereby women participants were more likely to support Tina not talking to Ben directly, compared with men participants who expressed some support for this approach:

> I don't think it's fair to say, "Oh, just go approach Ben about it, speak with him about it." That's really unfair to put that responsibility and to give that reaction to Tina. (Woman 1 FG1)

> I would advise Tina to talk to Ben directly. (Man 3 FG2)

There was also a common view among the men participants (rarely raised by women participants) that simply explaining it to Ben would mean he would then understand the behaviour was unwanted and stop:

> I would advise Tina to make her intentions very clear from the start, so to let him know that that's not acceptable and it's making her uncomfortable. … I would definitely advise her to confront Ben first … I think maybe he just doesn't know that it's not wanted, and she should make it very clear to him. … I'm surprised she doesn't even just message him and say, "I don't like it." (Man 1 FG2)

In contrast, a shared view expressed by women participants (raised by only one man participant) was an acknowledgement of the safety work that women regularly engage in to protect themselves against unwanted advances and a recognition that simply talking to Ben may create more problems. For example, one participant said Tina "should take text screenshots" (Woman 2 FG3) as evidence to show her boss. Another described how she had similar experiences to Tina but relied on her older sister, who also worked at the same place, for support. Other participants described how women typically try to ignore or downplay these situations for their safety:

> A lot of the time though it seems that women are very reluctant to come forward … [and end up] just pretending it's harmless flirting or hoping it will go away and ignoring it. (Woman 2 FG1)

In a similar vein, some participants reflected on the different emotions Tina may experience as a result of being harassed, including fear, concern and guilt:

> I'm sure she must be feeling a bit guilty because sometimes women tend to feel like they're doing something wrong. (Woman 3 FG1)

Other participants emphasised the need to seek Tina's permission before doing anything to offer support and to address some of the power dynamics and difficulties of the situation she was experiencing. In the few examples where women suggested Tina confront Ben, the motivation was framed around gathering evidence to support her claim, as opposed to encouraging this approach as a way to stop the harassment:

> I would convince her to write back to him – on whatever technology that he's harassing her on – a written, "No, I'm not interested. No, could you please stop?" I'd encourage her to get it all in written view, and … then I'd potentially even take that, or send that, to the police or something like that. Or even threaten to send it to the police. (Woman 2 FG5)

> If you can, a written record of your attempt to resolve this so that it doesn't look like you've gone straight away to complain to a third party but that you did take steps to address the problem in your workplace. And if you can have it down in writing showing what exactly you've said so there's no – I would never want to go and just have a phone conversation or a face-to-face conversation with someone because they might then deny you said something, or it could be open for interpretation. (Woman 3 FG1)

Expanding on the notion of seeking external resolutions, a key theme to emerge across the focus group discussions was the broader failings of the system for those experiencing WTFSH. As one participant observed:

> It's very difficult to get these kinds of things through the police and stuff like that. Like, unfortunately, realistically, it probably won't go that far, which is 100 per cent the fault of the police, the legal, the court system. (Woman 4 FG3)

Another participant similarly claimed:

> Resources are few and far between, and you've got to provide a lot of evidence and you have to go to court, and you've already been traumatised, it's hard enough to go through it – I don't recommend court to be honest, it's traumatising. (Woman 3 FG4)

Other participants noted that the behaviour would not be treated as seriously as face-to-face harassment or situations like stalking. They highlighted how this would make it even more challenging to pursue officially:

> I think going to the police, you have to provide a lot of evidence. The fact that people are saying, "It's probably just a joke", I think it would be difficult to pursue that avenue. (Woman 2 FG4)

Policy knowledge

A common theme in the focus group discussions was the absence of effective policies and laws covering WTFSH. Reflecting on their own workplaces, participants found it challenging to identify any policies or information on WTFSH specifically:

> [We have] general workplace sexual harassment, but I haven't really heard of technology-facilitated forms of that being mentioned in the workplace. (Woman 3 FG3)

> I think mine does [have policy], just in terms of sexual harassment in general, but I don't think it specifies the technology-facilitated. (Woman 5 FG3)

There was also a notable lack of knowledge of who to approach or what they should do, if they or a colleague were to experience WTFSH, except perhaps contacting their HR department. As these participants observed:

> I have no clue actually … other than, yeah, HR, I don't really know directly who to contact about that. (Woman 1 FG3)

> I wouldn't really know exactly who to contact. … Where I work, I guess the HR hasn't really made it clear or explicit that they would, sort of, deal with something like that or know what to do or provide services for that. (Woman 3 FG3)

For those working in smaller businesses, the lack of WTFSH and other policies addressing any kind of sexual harassment was also noted, highlighting an apparent problem for employees:

> At my last workplace, they didn't have any policies for that because it was a pretty small company. When I started, it was probably like 20, 30 people total. So yeah, they just hadn't got around it, they didn't have any HR employees or anything. (Man 1 FG2)

> I work in a very small business … it's pretty much a "whatever happens, happens", you've got to sort it out yourself. (Woman 3 FG4)

Even for participants from larger organisations, there was a sense that the onus was on employees to self-educate post experiencing harassment rather than having a proactive preventative approach in place:

> I don't remember anything being covered in our induction. So, I work for a government organisation, and I don't remember anything like that being covered in induction. … I think there's that generalised understanding that if it was ever to happen, then that's when you would [be] digging to educate yourself more about whether or not what's already happened, so it would be quite reactive in terms of educating and informing yourself about that. (Woman 2 FG1)

This highlights a significant limitation in workplace policy, whereby a focus on reactive rather than preventive and proactive educational approaches may not only contribute to a culture that facilitates WTFSH, but it also leaves little support available for those who experience WTFSH. This participant identified concern about having a specific policy on WTFSH:

> It would offer victims a sense of security, and if they're going to go to HR [to report it], they want something in writing that shows that this is what's happening and this is what I'm uncomfortable with, as opposed to someone has been sending me messages and I don't know if I'm protected. (Woman 5 FG3)

Some participants from small businesses or who were undertaking casual work highlighted how not having an HR department, or knowing your rights as a casual staff member, also meant there were very few avenues available if you were to experience WTFSH:

> I don't even have a HR department at my work. We're a small business, less than 10 employees. So, it's basically, speak to the boss or – that's it. (Woman 2 FG4)

This raises several key concerns around WTFSH and workplace sexual harassment more generally in light of the potential power dynamics and consequences that may arise for an employee in reporting the harassment to their boss. It also suggests the need for a government mandate to require training and policies to be put in place for smaller businesses and for casual workers to ensure their safety.

Recommendations for improvements

Digital platforms

Participants had very little confidence in reporting WTFSH to the platform providers themselves. There were a mix of reasons given for this. Some participants felt the providers would not be interested in resolving the issue or would not see it as their responsibility:

> The platform itself, they seem so far removed from the actual situation, they'd probably be the last avenue I'd go down. (Woman 3 FG4)

> I don't think my little fish in their giant technological pond would make much of a splash, so I probably would be quite reticent to report to the actual providers of the technology. (Woman 1 FG4)

Others described having negative experiences reporting to platforms in other contexts, such as their personal Facebook accounts, so they would not bother with this option:

> I have reported my friend's fake profiles and scams and been told, "We don't accept this report." So, I would be very reluctant to report anything … because I think it would be an absolutely pointless exercise. (Woman 1 FG4)

> You get a bit of a stock standard response like, "Please bear with us while we look into it," and then you've got to wait, and quite often the answer is unsatisfactory. (Woman 2 FG4)

Others highlighted that this could result in a negative impact for the person reporting; for example, if you blocked the person who was instigating the harassment, you may then miss out on essential work discussions via that platform, or it may become evident to the perpetrator that you blocked them. There may be negative consequences for you at work as a result. As these participants reflected:

> These forums can sometimes be used for specific workplace communication that is integral to the job, and so if your work communicated through Facebook and Facebook Messenger and someone is blocked, or that communication forum is no longer available, that has implications for the entire group, and then for you in terms of accessibility to that information. (Woman 2 FG1)

> I don't know what the outcome of that would be … because if they were to just all of a sudden block communication or something like that. If that was to impact on work or someone couldn't communicate with someone else, or they are wondering why has this person suddenly blocked me? (Woman 2 FG3)

One participant also reflected on the additional "emotional labour" that reporting externally would involve, which meant they would not suggest or use this option:

> That feels like so much more emotional labour to go through: finding a contact person, fill in some generic chatbot, like text thing, speak to it for a bit for, like, 10 minutes and then speak to someone who will put you up to someone else, someone else and someone else. Ultimately, I don't think it would be a worthwhile use of my time. (Woman 1 FG3)

The main benefit that participants identified in relation to reporting directly to the platform was the potential for more anonymity and that it could provide a way for the behaviour to be drawn to the attention of the organisation/company by the platform provider rather than by the victim and survivor. As one participant explained:

> If that platform was used in a workplace and then employees could report things that occurred through the platform, if that was somehow reported back to, you know, HR or a manager or somebody who had appropriate training in sexual harassment and how to support these cases, then I think I would be more inclined to do that. Just because I feel like I know it's going back into my organisation or workplace. And in that case, I think it's more likely that some action will be taken [by the organisation]. (Woman 4 FG3)

Further to providing a record of inappropriate behaviour on the platform to the relevant organisation/company, participants felt platform providers could do more to address and prevent WTFSH. One suggestion was for platforms to use the AI tools that are in place across social media platforms, for example, detecting potentially racist posts before they are sent and applying this to work-based platforms. As these participants flagged:

> They could always just have something like that that pops up like, "Before you begin this chat, any hate speech or sexual harassment will not be tolerated." (Woman 2 FG4)

> Maybe have pop-up ads and things to say that it's not tolerated, and if you need to report then there's avenues that you can do. They need to be more proactive when it comes to regulating the sort of things that go on. (Woman 5 FG5)

One participant pointed to the chatbot that guides people who have experienced image-based abuse (Zheng, 2022) as a potential way that platforms could address WTFSH and provide advice and support to those who have experienced it:

> In Australia now they have a chatbot that you can connect with if you are a victim of image-based abuse and then that helps you, you interact with it and it can give you all kinds of information, different information you need. Rather than go looking for it, it will come to you, in a sense [when you google help about image-based abuse]. … So having something like that for victims of workplace harassment as well. (Woman 2 FG1)

Cultural change through leadership and training

Participants recommended several ways in which workplaces and government could improve policies, laws and supports for preventing, addressing and responding to WTFSH. One of the most common changes suggested was to improve workplace cultures by enhancing education around WTFSH and challenging gendered norms and stereotypes (such as those attitudes identified in the survey) to ensure there isn't an environment that facilitates WTFSH. Reflecting on their experience working in a "misogynistic culture" where the "treatment is different between males and females" (Woman 2 FG4), one participant highlighted how a change could contribute to reducing WTFSH:

> Working at that company, the culture change, that would've been something that could've made a difference, but because they'd been there for 30 years, they're so set in their ways, they didn't see anything wrong with what they were doing. So, it's all embedded in that. So, unless there's a bit more of a proactive push for business improvements to start with culture change, and then as you go down the line, introduce different mechanisms to manage that and change people's attitudes and how they see people, then I think it's unfortunately just going to continue to exist. (Woman 2 FG4)

Other participants also reflected on the importance of shifting the culture through leadership, noting how this helps prevent WTFSH:

> I just want to touch upon the issue of culture, I think it's probably the systemic issue behind all of these – what we're talking about today. Obviously, it's very difficult to solve, but I think it starts with leadership. There's studies about women being in leadership positions and how they run an organisation and company in comparison to men, and just the massive difference people – everyone in the organisation feels different. The level of efficiency, the level of cohesion, and I think that kindness trickles down and it's infectious. ... It deters people from sexual harassment in any form. And I think culture starting from leadership is a preventative method. (Woman 1 FG4)

It was also noted that leadership should include a responsibility on managers and leaders in organisations to uphold the policies and procedures relating to WTFSH. As one participant observed:

> The idea that that person should then be held responsible for their professional practice framework and their performance and are they actually meeting KPIs in terms of are their staff aware of the policies and procedures and things. (Woman 3 FG1)

In addition to leadership supporting cultural change, other participants pointed to inductions and regular training as a way to help shift problematic norms and attitudes and in turn, prevent WTFSH:

> Making it part of the induction process for all new employees, and at least annual refreshers on code of conduct. I think employers have a responsibility here to make the code of conduct really clear to everyone in the workplace, not just as part of a tick a box induction training course, but also regular refresher training, and having written documentation in place around what the policies and procedures are with regard to this sort of behaviour. (Woman 2 FG2)

> It is interesting to explore the broader concept of the workplace culture. If it seems to be acceptable behaviour to a boss, then it's probably not the first time that it's happened. So, I'm wondering … how can I affect change in that workplace culture to set up respect and boundaries and things like that? … And I would encourage the idea of bringing in training externally and things like that. So just a broader sense of yes, I can help this one individual, but it sounds like it's a bigger problem that's going to continue to happen, unless the culture changes. (Woman 3 FG1)

In discussing what type of training would be helpful, participants focused on the delivery, suggesting it should be in person, as sometimes online training (particularly pre-recorded training) was not considered highly effective in communicating important messages and creating a platform for meaningful discussions. They also highlighted that the content should draw from "example scenarios, like case studies, to actually get it through to people" (Woman 4 FG3) and that it should reflect on the fact this "can happen to anyone, it's not just specific people. It can happen to anyone in the business and so letting people know that if this does happen [do this] and what to look for" (Man 2 FG2). Bystander training and having "a designated person who is responsible to speak to people about these issues" (Woman 1 FG3) were also identified as ways to help address WTFSH, with participants noting that having clear advice on how to intervene safely would be helpful.

Another mechanism to support cultural change identified by participants was to ensure clear consequences for inappropriate behaviour and to make people more aware of the consequences of engaging in WTFSH as a prevention mechanism. As this participant observed:

> Apart from educating them … letting the employees know that if such a thing happens there's – they can have ramifications, for example, from warnings to getting demoted from a place, for example, from a manager post to lower post, or even to losing a job. (Woman 1 FG1)

Laws and mandated policy requirements

Linked to improving internal policies, participants also flagged the benefits of government mandated requirements, such as laws or policies requiring businesses to have structured responses and training for all employees. As one participant observed:

> I do think maybe there should be a law that enforces businesses to have some regulations that they apply to or that makes businesses apply some regulations to their company because I think some businesses could just ignore it completely. (Man 3 FG2)

Laws were also considered a valuable way to assist in shaping cultures and challenging norms that facilitate WTFSH, but also to provide a safeguard for victims and survivors to be able to have some external backing should they experience WTFSH:

> It would be useful to have laws around it [WTFSH], because otherwise the sole responsibility is placed on the organisation, and some organisations might be more lax than others. And people who work in those environments, where let's say, the boss of the organisation is the perpetrator, what safeguards do victims have in place there? So, I think that the laws around sexual harassment constantly should be reviewed and updated. And given the proliferation of technology in recent years, advancements in that area would be very, very welcomed and are probably overdue. (Woman 1 FG1)

Other participants also pointed to the benefits for employees at smaller businesses of having mandatory laws that require policies, training and responses to WTFSH:

> There needs to be more centralised information for people that are working in smaller businesses, in workplaces where they don't have clearly defined HR policies, because I genuinely – I have a vague idea of what to do should I have an issue, but I wouldn't know the specifics of how to go about it, how to get support for myself. So I feel like if there was some sort of centralised state or nationwide thing that gave you the resources of what to do if you're experiencing harassment, how to support yourself, how to take legal steps if need be, having that – like the domestic violence campaigns that we have, having something that's very clear to access, something that comes up in ads on social media, something that comes up a lot and it's constantly there that might: 1) help support women and men that are going through this; and 2) be a deterrent for people that are using these platforms for nefarious purposes. (Woman 1 FG4)

As noted earlier, many participants working in small businesses did not have support for those experiencing WTFSH, nor clear reporting avenues. Some did not even have HR departments. Having official requirements in place at a government level was considered a way to mitigate some of these concerns:

> Especially small businesses, I guess I've had some first-hand experience, they're not equipped … and so it's up to the government in those instances, I think, to police that. But I do also think it needs to be in line with, also, individual workplace guidelines; so, I think there needs to be stricter internal policies and then, from there, that can go to external avenues. (Woman 2 FG 5)

This chapter has outlined the key findings from the three research stages. The next chapter provides an overview and discussion of the implications of the findings and suggestions for implications for policy and practice.

Discussion

Drivers

The research findings indicate that the key drivers of WTFSH perpetration are similar to other forms of sexual harassment and gender-based violence. Across each stage of the research, participants described the largely gendered nature of WTFSH, with men overwhelmingly described as the most likely perpetrators. This finding is remarkably similar to Australian and international research on sexual harassment, including the most recent AHRC (2022) national victimisation survey. The *Time for Respect* report found that men were the perpetrators in 77 per cent of cases reported (AHRC, 2022, p. 13). The survey further found that men were almost exclusively the perpetrators against women victims and survivors of sexual harassment (91%), and more than half the time (55%) were the perpetrators against men victims and survivors (AHRC, 2022, p. 13). This is echoed in the findings reported here from participants who self-disclosed engagement in WTFSH perpetration. It is clear that gender remains a crucial driver of workplace sexual harassment, whether it is perpetrated in person or via digital technologies.

A key finding across each stage of the research is the role of problematic workplace environments that minimise and tolerate sexually harassing behaviours. In interviews and focus groups, participants identified the critical role of workplace leadership and policy structures in setting the standard for employee behaviour. Reinforcing the research of O'Connor et al. (2021) in higher education, research participants repeatedly underscored the importance of training at all levels of organisations and of acknowledging workplace sexual harassment as an organisational rather than an individual issue.

Additionally, the survey results found compelling evidence that there is a correlation between perpetration of WTFSH and attitudes that both minimise the harms of WTFSH (such as through myth endorsement that blame victims and survivors and excuse perpetrators) and that endorse sexist and gender discriminatory views. Internationally, research over many decades shows that holding such attitudes is linked with both the likelihood and actual self-reported engagement in sexually harmful behaviours (Lonsway et al., 2008; Pina et al., 2009). Yet it is also clear from our research and existing literature that interventions that provide opportunities to learn about the severe and harmful impacts of sexual harassment can also significantly reduce sexual harassment myth acceptance and the likelihood to sexually harass (Diehl et al., 2014). As such, the findings reported here lend further evidence to the importance of primary prevention approaches that address the underlying cultures of tolerance for both sexual harassment and sexism and gender inequality in workplace settings (see Our Watch, 2021).

Behaviours, characteristics and trends

The research found that WTFSH involves a highly gendered set of behaviours, with men the predominant perpetrators and male-dominated workplaces over-represented as contexts where sexual harassment occurs. Interviews with technology platform providers, employer representatives, workplace safety regulators and online safety experts found that there was a high level of understanding of the gendered nature of sexual harassment among research participants. However, they also pointed to how technology-facilitated sexual harassment extends beyond the workplace, with women in female-dominated workplaces, such as massage therapy, at risk of experiencing WTFSH from men customers.

Among the most common technology-facilitated sexually harassing behaviours reported were: sending someone sexually suggestive comments or jokes; making sexually explicit comments via technologies (such as emails, SMS messages or on social media); repeated invitations to go out on dates; and making sexually explicit phone calls. Meanwhile, for in-person sexually harassing behaviours, we found that: sexually suggestive comments or jokes, sexual staring or leering, sexual bodily gestures, unwelcome touching or cornering, and repeated invitations to go out on dates were the most common. These findings are generally consistent with those reported by victims and survivors in the AHRC (2022) national survey. For instance, in that survey, sexually suggestive comments or jokes, intrusive questions, inappropriate staring or leering, unwelcome touching, and inappropriate physical contact were the most common forms of workplace sexual harassment reported (AHRC,

2022, p. 12). This consistency between the experiences of victims and survivors in the AHRC (2022) survey and those who self-disclosed engagement in sexual harassment behaviours reported in our study lends further support to the rigor of the results.

The survey findings further provide insights into the motivations for engagement in WTFSH. While some literature surmises that sexual harassment is primarily motivated by genuine relational pursuit or sexual attraction, many studies in recent years have argued that sexual harassment is instead motivated by sexism, hostility towards women and "masculinity threat" (see Page & Pina, 2015). Masculinity threat refers to the motivation of some men to assert their position of dominance or authority over women and other men (Page & Pina, 2015). Understanding sexual harassment as characterised by hostile motivations is particularly relevant to our findings. In particular, though 40.8 per cent (n = 203) of self-disclosed perpetrators said that they had "wanted to pursue a sexual or other personal relationship" with the victim and survivor in their most recent incident, many reported hostile motivations such as wanting to frighten (30.3%, n = 151), humiliate (30.3%, n = 151) or express their anger (30.5%, n = 152) towards the victim and survivor. Interestingly, many men perpetrators engaged in WTFSH towards leaders in their organisations (24.8%, n = 93) and other men (52.3%, n = 196). These characteristics of WTFSH lend further credence to the role of hostile motivations, including, potentially, masculinity threat rather than relational pursuit. Such motivations are similar to those previously found in a national study of perpetration of technology-facilitated abuse more broadly and suggest that motivations for perpetration of such harms may be similar regardless of the context being work-related or not (Powell, Flynn et al., 2022).

Our findings also shed some light on trends in the types of platforms that were used to engage in WTFSH. Survey respondents most commonly described using work (31.1%, n = 155) or personal email (26.5%, n = 132), work (24.7%, n = 123) or personal phones and mobiles (calls or SMS; 29.1%, n = 145), rather than specific social media (18.1%, n = 90) or other communicative platforms. Though speculative, this might indicate technology-facilitated sexual harassment is an extension of workplace sexual harassment more generally, as opposed to being driven by "new" opportunities in informal modes of online communication, such as WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger. This somewhat diverges from the 2022 AHRC national survey, which found that the most common forms of technology were online messaging (38%), social media (36%) and SMS or MMS (31%), indicating that there is a mix of old and new or newer technologies being used in WTFSH (p. 75). This was the first time the national survey asked respondents what form of technology was used when the technology-facilitated harassment occurred (AHRC, 2022, p. 198), and it will be interesting to track changes in response to this question over time.

In relation to the impact of COVID-19 on the prevalence of WTFSH, stakeholders interviewed in Stage 1 had mixed views about whether the pandemic and associated work from home orders had led to an increase in WTFSH. The findings from Stage 2 meanwhile indicate that 57.2 per cent (n = 285) of those who reported engaging in WTFSH said that the most recent incident occurred after 1 March 2020 (when COVID-19 pandemic measures began to be applied) and that 36.5 per cent (n = 182) of respondents said that the most recent incident "definitely" or "probably" occurred around the time that they were working from home. While this does not indicate a causal relationship or a clear increase in WTFSH, it does suggest that these behaviours continued into work from home settings.

Improving responses: Implications for policy and research

The quantitative (survey) and the qualitative (interview and focus groups) research findings demonstrate a lack of clarity and knowledge around existing responses to prevent, detect and respond to WTFSH. While participants could self-identify what behaviours could constitute WTFSH, reporting and formal actions taken in response to WTFSH were low, with both the qualitative and quantitative findings suggesting that perpetrators are rarely held to account for their behaviours. There is an absence of knowledge of where to seek support or report WTFSH incidents. In the qualitative data, this was

especially evident in smaller businesses where there may not be HR departments or internal policies that capture WTFSH behaviours and in contexts where the harassment may be perpetrated not by co-workers, but by clients, customers or members of the general community, for example, because of the public or high-profile nature of someone's work (e.g. journalists and politicians).

The research also showed that the impact of changes to the working environment, particularly in the post-pandemic context, has blurred the boundaries between professional and private life, with limited guidance on online and communicative behaviours that may constitute sexual harassment. This is especially concerning given the lack of internal or external policies on appropriate digital communications and interactions, as well as the challenges that arise when more formal work interactions move to less formal digital channels, for example, corridor discussions in the workplace shifting to WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger groups or individual chats.

Overall, our findings suggest that current responses to WTFSH are insufficient, and that various measures are required to address WTFSH across organisations and employers, technology providers, and government policy and legislation.

Organisations and employers

At the organisational and employer level, there is a substantive need for leadership to accept accountability and set the standard for workplace culture, behaviours and communications, and to provide an example from the top to make preventing and addressing sexual harassment a priority. The quantitative and qualitative research provided clear evidence that problematic attitudes, gendered and sexist assumptions and victim-blaming or harm minimisation attitudes play a role in facilitating WTFSH perpetration. While introducing the positive duty on employers to take reasonable and proportionate measures to eliminate sex discrimination, sexual harassment and victimisation is a critical step, attention to cultural change and guidance regarding appropriate and inappropriate conduct on digital technologies in the work context is vital. This must be demonstrated through positive leadership and strengthened with training, policies and guidance materials that engage with relatable case studies to explain the harms and implications of WTFSH. This responsibility should also extend to workplace policy updates, staff training and product review processes when considering or rolling out new technologies in the workplace to ensure that user safety is paramount.

Interview participants frequently emphasised the need for meaningful training as one participant stated, "Workplaces, most of them or the big corporates, might have a little webinar or something like that they have to click through, and they don't really have to pay attention to it" (Woman RP4). This sentiment echoes the findings of the *Respect@Work* Inquiry (AHRC, 2020, p. 665) and the VAGO (2020) audit of five local councils in Victoria. In the VAGO report, all councils provided training on appropriate behaviour, but it was found to be ineffective because most staff only completed online refresher courses (missing out on the opportunity for open discussion, which can occur even in live online sessions), and training materials did not provide guidance on bystander action (2020, p. 8). There were also limitations identified in the training not always reflecting organisation policies or processes, and, in three councils, managers reported receiving no training on responding to reports of sexual harassment (VAGO, 2020, p. 8). Other suggestions may include culture, safety and wellbeing in workplace audits for medium and larger organisations to ensure these needs are being met. This could be mandated internally or externally (through government requirements) in a similar vein to reporting on workplace health and safety incidents. This would help support the new legal positive duty and provide a clear mechanism for the AHRC to investigate compliance (Respect@Work, 2023).

Industry (employers, technology platforms and government) has been slow to respond to the changing working culture and environment that exists in a post-pandemic context concerning the development of appropriate policies and supports. This has resulted in policies and supports not keeping pace with changes to how, where and when people work, as well as shifts in the ways that people use and communicate with co-workers, bosses, clients, customers, competitors, viewers, readers or listeners, and constituents across a range of digital

technologies. This has the potential to create blurred boundaries as to what constitutes professional and unprofessional conduct when using digital technologies and facilitate an environment where WTFSH is not only possible but probable. Changes in the expectations of employers for employees to be accessible "online" has also contributed to creating an environment conducive to WTFSH, for example, requiring journalists or politicians to have an online presence as part of their job requirements.

Clear policies on workplace sexual harassment that are explicit about the inclusion of WTFSH are vital. These internal policies should provide details on what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate behaviour in relation to work contexts and digital technologies. This allows workplace approaches to WTFSH to be preventative, not reactive, and can also provide victims and survivors with a clear sense of their rights. Any policies should also clearly outline the potential punishments and outcomes for those who perpetrate WTFSH. There may be some lessons that can be learnt internationally in helping businesses develop sexual harassment taxonomies to assist in defining inappropriate behaviours and outlining appropriate responses and outcomes for perpetrators. In the United States, for example, Uber commissioned the National Sexual Violence Resource Center and the Urban Institute (Sniffen et al., 2018) to develop a system of understanding sexually inappropriate behaviours committed by or on drivers and possible response options at each stage of behaviour level. While not immune to critique, in the sense of establishing a hierarchy of harm, this type of evidence-based approach could have the benefit of helping employers define the scope of the problem and appropriate responses. This could also help address the lack of accountability of perpetrators and the persistent culture of protecting alleged perpetrators at the harm and expense of victims and survivors. The benefits of clear definitions and policies also extend to education purposes for perpetrators and workplaces to better understand and deter WTFSH.

Another area for consideration in internal policy and practice is to improve reporting mechanisms for bystanders and victims and survivors, both within workplaces and more broadly, with the potential for anonymous reporting options (such as those used for sexual assault reports). Research internationally and within Australia has examined this option concerning sexual assault, suggesting that it can provide an important pathway for victims and survivors and provide workplaces with insight into improvements that may be needed without placing an onus on the victim and survivor to disclose their identity or experience more widely (Delong et al., 2018; Heydon & Powell, 2018; Loney-Howes et al., 2022; Miller et al., 2018). Given previous research has found that victim experiences of technology-facilitated abuse and/or sexual harassment can be shaped by intersecting inequalities such as gender, sexuality, younger age, disability and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander status, reporting and support mechanisms should be designed with diversity and inclusion front and centre.

Technology and digital platform providers

Our research found that technology can facilitate workplace sexual harassment, making it easier to perpetrate and to cross the line on what constitutes appropriate behaviour. This is not unlike the findings from research on technology-facilitated abuse more broadly, which has found that the anonymity and invisibility of digital technologies can enhance people's likelihood of engaging in harassing behaviours (Flynn et al., 2022, 2023a, 2023b). In the qualitative research, participants pointed to various examples of digital technologies being used to sexually harass in the workplace setting, for instance, perpetrators using workplace technologies such as shared calendars to monitor a colleague's location and daily activities and engage in stalking behaviours or using Zoom to take photos without permission or knowledge. Our research thus found that a level of responsibility should be placed on technology and digital platform providers to detect, prevent and respond to WTFSH.

As a starting point, safety-by-design principles should be applied in developing all workplace technologies to ensure the burden of safety does not fall solely upon the user and that safety and security features are inbuilt to address misuse. These arguments were initially made in relation to children and young people (see the London

School of Economics and Political Science, n.d.) and have more recently moved to the development of apps and social media platforms, with Apple, Meta and Twitter all starting to work more closely with domestic and family violence agencies and researchers (see WESNET, 2020, 2022) as well as smart home technologies. As we propose in the next section, there is a demonstrable need to expand this discussion to include workplace technologies. One way to prioritise this discussion would be to establish a workplace-focused stream within the eSafety Commissioner that targets and engages providers of workplace technologies, for example, through research, presentations or training that build safety-by-design awareness and broader awareness of online safety and potential harms.

Digital platforms that create workplace technologies could also be more proactive in using technologies to detect, prevent and respond to WTFSH. Some examples identified in the research include requiring platforms to report to workplaces when the platforms are notified of their technologies being misused for WTFSH. This would require a degree of anonymity to ensure the victim and survivor was not identified. Digital platforms and technology providers could also use various automated detection tools and AI to block inappropriate content on workplace technologies or to warn the person before they engage in the behaviour that the action/content could be considered inappropriate.

This approach has been used with social media platforms, such as Facebook and X (Twitter), and dating apps, where users are warned before they post or send a message that it may contain potentially offensive content, and they are asked if they still wish to post/send (True & Flynn, 2022). In some cases, for example, on Bumble, the person receiving the message also gets an automatic pop-up notification to check if they found the content offensive. If they do, they are directed to the reporting options. Similar features could be implemented into workplace technologies, for example, detecting when the language used in a work email may be considered inappropriate or offensive and providing a warning pop-up message. Likewise, the email recipient could receive an automated pop-up to see if they find the content offensive and be directed towards reporting/support options.

The feasibility and appetite of applying AI technologies within organisations would be impacted by the affordability of the tools, which may be prohibitive for smaller businesses, their application to a broader range of online harms (including and beyond WTFSH), the accuracy of detection, the encryption of workplace communication tools, and workplace policies and risk tolerance. Any engagement with AI tools would also need to take into consideration the potential ways that perpetrators can use AI as a training tool to filter their language to avoid detection as a harasser or abuser. For example, there are some concerns that AI in tools like the Our Family Wizard app, which is used to discourage overtly offensive communication between ex-partners in dealing with childcare arrangements, may influence perpetrators to direct their abuse in other ways, such as excessive communications and unreasonable requests (see Heard et al., 2023). There would also be a need, as with any AI tools, to ensure some human moderation checks are in place alongside follow-up procedures and protocols to address the negative behaviour.

Government policy and legislation

One of the most problematic findings to emerge across the qualitative and quantitative data was participants' lack of knowledge of relevant government policies, supports and responses to WTFSH. In addition, less than half of those who admitted engaging in WTFSH perpetration had a formal complaint or report made in response to their behaviour. This suggests that while there is knowledge and awareness of WTFSH, there is a gap in responses and repercussions for these behaviours. In this regard, our research demonstrates that government leadership must proactively support employers and technology platforms to prevent WTFSH. A starting point for this would be the introduction of government-mandated requirements that connect with the new legal positive duty on employers to actively prevent WTFSH as part of their broader requirements to prevent workplace sexual harassment, sex discrimination and victimisation (Respect@Work, 2023). Arising from the *Respect@Work* report (AHRC, 2020), these changes require employers and persons conducting a business to shift their focus to actively preventing workplace sexual harassment (and

discrimination) rather than reactionary responses after it occurs. This report proposes the consideration of laws or policies that require employers and organisations of all sizes to have structured responses and training in place for all employees on WTFSH, and which clearly defines and outlines a basic standard or model for all employers to prevent and respond to WTFSH, including guidance on responses to perpetration. This will benefit all industries and organisations, but especially smaller businesses yet to implement policies and problem industries that lack incentives for making genuine change. Drawing on international evidence-based examples, such as the sexually inappropriate behaviours taxonomy developed by the National Sexual Violence Resource Center and the Urban Institute (Sniffen et al., 2018) for Uber, may also be helpful for the government in clearly defining WTFSH (and sexual harassment in the workplace more broadly) and outlining appropriate responses.

A clear law or mandated policy requirements are also a helpful way to assist in shaping cultures and challenging norms that facilitate WTFSH while also providing educative benefits for potential perpetrators and safeguards for victims and survivors to be able to have some external backing, should they experience WTFSH. We recommend that any policy or legal guidelines on WTFSH are evidence-based and should be informed by further research examining best practice guidelines for workplaces responding to alleged perpetrators. We are pleased to see that the AHRC has recently released *Guidelines for Complying with the Positive Duty under the* Sex Discrimination Act 1984 *(Cth*; AHRC, 2023) and that the guidelines address some of the findings identified in this research project, including the importance of leadership and culture change in addressing workplace sexual harassment. However, we also note that the guidelines do not provide advice for employers regarding holding perpetrators to account and we suggest that the development of resources to address this issue should be prioritised. We further suggest that any requirements or information provided by the government be in plain English to ensure ease of understanding for the general community, accessibility for people with a disability, applicability for younger workers (e.g. aged 15 to 17 years) who may be particularly vulnerable, and that information and education be provided in multiple languages.

The government could also consider expanding the remit of the Workplace Gender Equality Agency, such as by requiring information regarding harassment policies, training, and aggregate data on reports of harassment to be made publicly available, similar to existing mandatory gender pay gap reporting for organisations of a particular size. This would provide another mechanism to hold employers accountable for ensuring safe workplaces. It would also likely flow into improving workplace awareness and prioritisation of WTFSH and sexual harassment more broadly, which should positively impact workplace culture.

As flagged earlier, there is also scope for the government to consider implementing more stringent government requirements for technology providers involving safety-by-design principles. Additionally, independent authorities like the eSafety Commissioner could consider establishing a workplace-focused stream that targets and engages providers of workplace technologies in adopting safety-by-design principles. This could include presentations and training to build safety-by-design principles into digital workplace platforms and broader advice to businesses on the potential harms that employees may experience and how they can prevent, detect and respond to WTFSH and related harms through a safety lens. This would further prioritise the importance of this issue.

Conclusion

This report has provided a summary of the findings of 20 in-depth qualitative interviews with industry stakeholders (including employer representatives, technology providers, regulators and workplace and online safety experts); a national survey of Australian adults' (18 to 65 years) engagement in the perpetration of WTFSH (n = 3,345); and five online focus groups with 28 young adults (18 to 39 years) on WTFSH. It has reported on the drivers of WTFSH and the behaviours, characteristics and trends that can be observed in the perpetration of WTFSH in Australia. It also documented the various challenges in preventing and responding to WTFSH, particularly in a post-pandemic context where the nature, location and mode of workplace communication has changed substantially, without industry (employer, technology platforms, government) responses keeping pace.

The report finds that workplace sexual harassment, both in person and via technology, is a problem that has significant harms and implications. There are gendered elements to the perpetration of WTFSH, in that men are significantly more likely than women to report engaging in WTFSH, in-person workplace sexual harassment and engaging in both WTFSH and in-person workplace sexual harassment. We also found a significant link between high endorsement of sexist and gender discriminatory attitudes, as well as high endorsement of sexual harassment myths, and engaging in WTFSH perpetration. This suggests there is much work to be done to address problematic social attitudes and norms within the workplace and, more broadly, to prevent sexual harassment and promote equity and respect.

The report also found that less than half of those respondents who reported having engaged in WTFSH had a formal report or complaint made against them for this behaviour. This finding was reinforced across the interviews and focus groups, where participants were unclear about where to seek help or support if they or a colleague were experiencing WTFSH, whether WTFSH was officially covered by workplace sexual harassment policy, and, for those who worked in smaller businesses, whether there were any policies or response options in place if they were to experience any workplace sexual harassment. Interviews with employer representatives and regulators also underscored this finding through their lack of clarity regarding how to hold perpetrators to account and lack of knowledge of any prosecutions in response to WTFSH (respectively).

Overall, it is clear that leadership is required within workplaces, digital platform providers and governments in relation to defining, preventing and responding to WTFSH. Within workplaces, this requires top-down leadership on appropriate workplace culture and attitudes, as well as training to prioritise the issue of WTFSH as an organisational issue. Within digital platform providers, user safety and rights must be paramount and central to the design and development of online products and services. Within government, the provision of practical, targeted guidance to employers must be a priority, along with ensuring that digital platform providers adopt safety-by-design principles and implement better prevention, detection and responses to WTFSH.

While this report provides new knowledge of WTFSH perpetration, further research is needed to develop a deeper understanding of WTFSH in a range of workplace contexts and to explore how digital technologies can be harnessed in positive ways to help address, prevent and detect WTFSH and foster healthy, workplace cultures. We also suggest that further research is conducted with an intersectional gendered lens that explores additional power dynamics within workplaces and society, including and beyond gender. There is also scope to further explore the experiences of those with public profiles who experience WTFSH and the obligations of employers to create a safe workplace that extends to all the environments that they encourage or require their staff to engage within. Research documenting and evaluating existing workplace policies and training (including the effectiveness of different modes of delivery) on sexual harassment and WTFSH in Australia and international best practice is also needed. Finally, while not the focus of this research, it is important to note that some victims and survivors may experience WTFSH as part of broader family, domestic and sexual violence – whether this may be because the victim and survivor is in the workplace when they are being harassed or because they are working from home. There is a need for research that further engages with the diversity of victim and survivor experiences, including how WTFSH can be an extension of coercive control and family violence.

There is also a demonstrable need for digital platform providers of workplace technologies to implement better detection and responses to WTFSH. There is certainly scope for this in light of the new legal positive duty on employers and persons conducting business to actively prevent workplace sexual harassment, sex discrimination and victimisation rather than reactionary responses after it occurs. The regulatory powers conferred on the AHRC to investigate and enforce compliance with the new positive duty from December 2023 (Respect@Work, 2023) also provides further opportunities for action to prioritise WTFSH as a harmful act and to develop clear definitions, guidelines, training, responses and prevention education on this behaviour to improve wellbeing and safety in workplaces more broadly.

Author contributions

Asher Flynn, Anastasia Powell and Lisa Wheildon prepared this report. All researchers were involved in developing, designing and conducting the qualitative fieldwork components (interviews and focus groups). Asher Flynn and Lisa Wheildon undertook the qualitative analysis. All researchers were involved in the development and design of the quantitative survey. Anastasia Powell and Lisa Wheildon undertook the quantitative analysis.

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APPENDIX A:

Supplementary data tables

Table A1: Overall sample demographics, by gender

	Women		Men		Total	
	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*
Respondent region						
Capital city or surrounds	24.0	*803*	26.3	*883*	50.4	*1686*
Major city/Urban centre	14.2	*476*	10.1	*339*	24.4	*815*
Regional town or surrounds	12.1	*406*	8.2	*277*	20.4	*683*
Rural or remote area	2.7	*92*	2.1	*69*	4.8	*161*
Respondent sexuality						
Heterosexual	88.7	*1576*	90.2	*1415*	89.4	*2991*
LGBQA+	11.3	*201*	9.8	*153*	10.6	*354*
Respondent age						
18–24	21.7	*385*	2.0	*32*	12.5	*417*
25–34	27.5	*489*	8.5	*134*	18.6	*623*
35–44	20.1	*367*	14.3	*225*	17.7	*592*
45–54	10.9	*194*	23.8	*373*	17.0	*567*
55–64	9.8	*175*	17.6	*276*	13.5	*451*
65 or more	9.4	*167*	33.7	*528*	20.8	*695*
Respondent ATSI status						
No/Not sure	95.9	*1705*	88.0	*1380*	92.2	*3085*
Yes	4.1	*72*	12.0	*188*	7.8	*260*
Respondent LOTE at home						
No/Not sure	47.5	*1590*	41.7	*1398*	89.3	*2988*
Yes	5.5	*187*	5.1	*170*	10.6	*357*
Respondent disability						
No/Not sure	76.3	*1356*	71.0	*1114*	73.8	*2470*
Yes	23.7	*421*	29.0	*454*	26.2	*875*
Respondent education level						
Secondary/High school	27.1	*481*	24.2	*379*	25.7	*860*
Certificate/Vocational Education/TAFE	32.8	*583*	30.5	*479*	31.7	*1062*
Tertiary, undergraduate	29.8	*530*	24.4	*382*	27.3	*912*
Tertiary, postgraduate	10.3	*183*	20.9	*328*	15.3	*511*
Sexual harassment myths (ISHMA scale)						
Low endorsement	46.8	*832*	16.1	*252*	32.4	*1084*
Moderate endorsement	50.5	*897*	63.7	*999*	56.7	*1896*
High endorsement	2.7	*48*	20.2	*317*	10.9	*365*
Sexist and gender discriminatory attitudes (GEAS)						
Low endorsement	76.3	*1351*	36.4	*570*	57.4	*1921*
Moderate endorsement	23.1	*410*	50.5	*792*	35.9	*1202*
High endorsement	0.9	*16*	13.1	*206*	6.6	*222*
Total	53.1	*1777*	46.9	*1568*	100.0	*3345*

Table A2: Any workplace sexually harassing behaviours engaged in, by sample demographics

	Yes, WTFSH		Yes, FFSH		Yes, Any Workplace SH	
	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*
Respondent gender						
Woman	6.9	*123*	15.4	*273*	17.1	*304*
Man*	23.9	*375*	31.0	*486*	33.5	*526*
Respondent region						
Capital city or surrounds	16.0	*270*	25.0	*421*	26.7	*451*
Major city/Urban centre	19.9	*162*	25.6	*209*	28.2	*230*
Regional town or surrounds	7.9	*54*	14.1*	*96*	16.4*	*112*
Rural or remote area	7.5*	*12*	20.5	*33*	23.0	*37*
Respondent sexuality						
Heterosexual	14.8	*443*	22.5	*672*	24.6	*735*
LGBQA+	15.5	*55*	24.6	*87*	26.8	*95*
Respondent age						
18–24	7.4	*31*	14.1	*59*	15.8	*66*
25–34*	18.9	*118*	25.8	*161*	27.9	*174*
35–44*	25.5	*151*	33.1	*196*	35.5	*210*
45–54*	24.7	*140*	29.5	*167*	32.3	*183*
55–64	5.8	*26*	15.7	*71*	18.4	*83*
65 or more	4.6	*32*	15.1	*105*	16.4	*114*
Respondent ATSI status						
No/Not sure	10.6	*326*	18.6	*573*	20.8	*643*
Yes*	66.2	*127*	71.5	*186*	71.9	*187*
Respondent LOTE at home						
No/Not sure	14.1	*422*	21.4	*638*	23.7	*707*
Yes	21.3	*76*	33.9	*121*	34.5	*123*
Respondent disability						
No/Not sure	14.3	*352*	22.0	*543*	24.2	*598*
Yes	16.7	*146*	24.7	*216*	26.5	*232*
Respondent education level						
Secondary/High school	11.9	*102*	19.2	*165*	22.0	*189*
Certificate/Vocational Education/TAFE	8.4	*89*	17.1	*182*	19.2	*204*
Tertiary, undergraduate	12.1	*110*	20.8	*190*	22.4	*204*
Tertiary, postgraduate*	38.6	*197*	43.4	*222*	45.6	*233*
Sexual harassment myths (ISHMA scale)						
Low endorsement*	4.2	*45*	9.1	*99*	10.9	*118*
Moderate endorsement*	11.6	*219*	21.1	*401*	23.7	*450*
High endorsement*	64.1	*234*	71.0	*259*	71.8	*262*
Sexist and gender discriminatory attitudes (GEAS)						
Low endorsement*	4.5	*86*	11.8	*227*	13.7	*263*
Moderate endorsement*	18.3	*220*	27.5	*331*	30.4	*365*
High endorsement*	86.5	*192*	90.5	*201*	91.0	*202*
Total, engaged in behaviours	14.9	*498*	22.7	*759*	24.8	*830*

Note: * denotes statistically significant difference $p < .001$.

Table A3: Workplace industry, as disclosed by those engaging in TFSH

	Women		Men		Total	
	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*
Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing	0.4	*2*	2.8	*14*	3.2	*16*
Mining	0.8	*4*	1.6	*8*	2.4	*12*
Manufacturing	0.6	*3*	6.2	*31*	6.8	*34*
Electricity, Gas, Water and Waste Services	0.2	*1*	1.4	*7*	1.6	*8*
Construction	1.6	*8*	5.8	*29*	7.4	*37*
Wholesale Trade	0.6	*3*	1.8	*9*	2.4	*12*
Retail Trade	4.2	*21*	4.2	*21*	8.4	*42*
Accommodation and Food Services	2.4	*12*	3.0	*15*	5.4	*27*
Transport, Postal and Warehousing	0.4	*2*	2.8	*14*	3.2	*16*
Information, Media and Telecommunications	0.6	*3*	14.4	*72*	15.0	*75*
Financial and Insurance Services	1.2	*6*	3.2	*16*	4.4	*22*
Rental, Hiring and Real Estate Services	0.6	*3*	1.0	*5*	1.6	*8*
Professional, Scientific and Technical Services	0.6	*3*	5.8	*29*	6.4	*32*
Administrative and Support Services	1.4	*7*	2.8	*14*	4.2	*21*
Public Administration and Safety	0.6	*3*	0.6	*3*	1.2	*6*
Education and Training	1.6	*8*	2.2	*11*	3.8	*19*
Health Care and Social Assistance	3.4	*17*	2.4	*12*	5.8	*29*
Arts and Recreation Services	0.0	*0*	0.4	*2*	0.4	*2*
Personal Services	0.8	*4*	1.0	*5*	1.4	*7*
Other Services	0.6	*3*	3.0	*15*	3.6	*18*
Other	0.8	*4*	8.2	*41*	9.0	*45*
Don't know/Prefer not to say	1.2	*6*	0.8	*4*	2.0	*10*

Table A4: Endorsement of sexual harassment myths, whole sample

	Strongly disagree/ Disagree		Neither/ Undecided		Agree/ Strongly agree	
	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*
ISHMA items						
As long as a woman doesn't lose her job, her claim of sexual harassment shouldn't be taken too seriously	83.0	*2778*	8.6	*289*	8.3	*278*
Women who claim that they have been sexually harassed are usually exaggerating	69.7	*2333*	19.5	*653*	10.7	*359*
If a woman is sexually harassed, she must have done something to invite it	80.4	*2688*	10.8	*362*	8.8	*295*
Women often file frivolous charges of sexual harassment	46.9	*1570*	34.6	*1156*	18.5	*619*
If a woman doesn't make a complaint, it probably wasn't serious enough to be sexual harassment	71.7	*2399*	16.0	*534*	12.3	*412*
It is difficult to believe sexual harassment charges that were not reported at the time	52.7	*1764*	24.3	*812*	23.0	*769*
Women who wait weeks or months to report sexual harassment are probably just making it up	69.5	*2324*	18.8	*629*	11.7	*392*
Women who claim sexual harassment have usually done something to cause it	74.9	*2506*	16.0	*535*	9.1	*304*
Sometimes women make up allegations of sexual harassment to extort money from their employer	37.6	*1258*	32.8	*1098*	29.6	*989*
Women who are caught having an affair with their supervisor sometimes claim that it was sexual harassment	19.4	*650*	44.2	*1480*	36.3	*1215*
Women sometimes file charges of sexual harassment for no apparent reason	43.1	*1442*	31.0	*1037*	25.9	*866*
A woman can easily ruin her supervisor's career by claiming that he "came on" to her	22.9	*766*	28.1	*940*	49.0	*1639*
Sometimes a woman has a "fantasy" relationship with her boss and then claims that he sexually harassed her	44.8	*1500*	36.5	*1220*	18.7	*625*
Most women are flattered when they get sexual attention from men with whom they work	61.0	*2041*	23.8	*796*	15.2	*508*
Most women secretly enjoy it when men "come on" to them at work	69.3	*2317*	18.9	*631*	11.9	*397*
It's inevitable that men will "hit on" women at work	52.5	*1757*	27.0	*904*	20.4	*684*
Women shouldn't be so quick to take offense when a man at work expresses sexual interest	61.2	*2048*	23.4	*782*	15.4	*515*
Women can usually stop unwanted sexual attention by simply telling the man that his behavior is not appreciated	43.5	*1446*	20.6	*688*	36.2	*1211*
Women can usually stop unwanted sexual attention from a co-worker by telling their supervisor about it	32.8	*1096*	27.2	*911*	40.0	*1338*
Nearly all instances of sexual harassment would end if the woman simply told the man to stop	60.1	*2009*	19.6	*656*	20.3	*680*
Out-of-scale items						
Trans men and trans women should not have to tolerate sexual harassment in the workplace	4.6	*154*	9.1	*305*	86.3	*2886*
Sexual harassment against men must be taken seriously	2.9	*98*	6.3	*211*	90.8	*3036*
Trans people secretly enjoy it when others "come on" to them at work	63.0	*2109*	27.6	*924*	9.3	*312*
Sexual harassment is degrading to victims and survivors	7.7	*259*	11.7	*391*	80.6	*2695*
Perpetrators of sexual harassment must be held responsible for their behaviour	3.3	*109*	5.7	*192*	91.0	*3044*
If a man is sexually harassed, he must have done something to invite it	75.5	*2527*	15.1	*506*	9.3	*312*

Table A5: Endorsement of sexist and exclusionary attitudes, whole sample

	Strongly disagree/ Disagree		Neither/ Undecided		Agree/ Strongly agree	
	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*
GEAS items						
Many women exaggerate how unequally women are treated in Australia	49.7	*1662*	25.7	*859*	24.6	*824*
Many women fail to fully appreciate all that men do for them	50.9	*1701*	29.5	*987*	19.6	*657*
In the workplace, men generally make more capable bosses than women	64.2	*2148*	23.2	*775*	12.6	*422*
I think it is embarrassing for a man to have a job that is usually filled by a woman	78.0	*2610*	13.4	*449*	8.6	*286*
A woman has to have children to be fulfilled	77.1	*2579*	13.7	*457*	9.2	*309*
Women are less capable than men of thinking logically	78.1	*2611*	12.7	*425*	9.2	*309*
Men should take control in relationships and be the head of the household	60.1	*2010*	25.5	*853*	14.4	*482*
If a woman earns more than her male partner, it is not good for the relationship	74.7	*2499*	16.4	*549*	8.9	*297*
I think there's no harm in men making sexist jokes about women when they are among their male friends	68.3	*2284*	19.5	*651*	12.3	*410*
Many women mistakenly interpret innocent remarks or acts as being sexist	42.4	*1419*	29.8	*996*	27.8	*930*
On the whole, men make better political leaders than women	66.6	*2227*	21.8	*728*	11.7	*390*
Men, rather than women, should hold positions of responsibility in the community	67.8	*2267*	21.5	*720*	10.7	*358*
A man should never admit when others have hurt his feelings	79.2	*2650*	12.0	*400*	8.8	*295*
Discrimination against women is no longer a problem in the workplace in Australia	73.9	*2471*	15.2	*507*	11.0	*367*
Women often flirt with men just to be hurtful	56.3	*1882*	27.9	*934*	15.8	*529*
Women prefer a man to be in charge of the relationship	46.1	*1541*	35.2	*1178*	18.7	*626*
When a couple start dating, the woman should not be the one to initiate sex	52.5	*1755*	37.0	*1236*	10.6	*354*
I think it's okay for men to joke with their male friends about being violent towards women	86.1	*2880*	6.8	*227*	7.1	*238*
Out-of-scale items						
Discrimination towards migrants is no longer a problem in Australia	72.2	*2414*	17.0	*570*	10.8	*361*
Many racial minorities wrongly interpret innocent comments as being racist	36.2	*1210*	33.0	*1105*	30.8	*1030*
I would not mind working with a trans man or woman	8.2	*273*	17.2	*574*	74.7	*2498*
Same-sex parents are just as capable of being good parents as a heterosexual couple	10.8	*361*	16.5	*552*	72.7	*2432*
It is good to have a multicultural Australia	6.1	*204*	12.5	*417*	81.4	*2724*
Police should act as if members of all racial groups are equally likely to commit crimes	15.8	*530*	16.5	*551*	67.7	*2264*
I would feel uncomfortable knowing my child's teacher was lesbian, gay or bisexual	67.1	*2246*	16.4	*548*	16.5	*551*
The acceptance of transgender and non- binary people in Australia has gone too far	50.9	*1704*	24.5	*820*	24.5	*821*

APPENDIX B:

Project Advisory Board Members

1) eSafety Women
2) Google Australia
3) Department of Indigenous Studies, Macquarie University
4) Meta Australia (Facebook/Instagram/WhatsApp)
5) Multicultural Centre for Women's Health
6) Our Watch
7) R4Respect
8) Rainbow Health Australia
9) Safe and Equal
10) Sexual Assault Support Service
11) Sally Goldner AM, diversity consultant and public speaker
12) Victoria Police
13) WESNET
14) Women with Disabilities Victoria
15) Youth Affairs Council Victoria (YACVic)

ANROWS

AUSTRALIA'S NATIONAL RESEARCH ORGANISATION FOR WOMEN'S SAFETY

to Reduce Violence against Women & their Children