

# Summary of Findings: Practitioner survey



## Sexual harassment in Victoria's legal workplaces

Victorian Legal Services  
BOARD + COMMISSIONER

### Prevalence of sexual harassment in the legal sector

32% of all respondents reported personally experiencing sexual harassment at some point in their legal career based on the legal definition of that term – consistent with the results for all Australian workplaces found by the Australian Human Rights Commission. **This increased to 36%** when respondents were given a behavioural definition of sexual harassment, which is the most accurate way to gauge the prevalence of this issue.

### Who is the typical harasser?

Harassers are almost always male (**90%**), most often in a more senior role than the person affected (**72%**) and generally aged over 40 (**66%**). Almost half the time they are all three.

It was common for a sexual harassment incident to be part of a pattern of behaviour from the harasser (**40%**) and for the harasser to be known for being involved in similar incidents (**48%**).

### What form does the harassment take?

Most commonly: intrusive questions about a respondents' own or someone else's private life or physical appearance (**24%**), followed by sexually suggestive sounds, comments or jokes (**23%**), and inappropriate staring or leering (**19%**). However, **18%** of respondents said they had experienced at least one physical form of sexual harassment (e.g. unwelcome physical contact, touching).

### Differences between women and men's experience

**61% of female respondents** reported experiencing sexual harassment in the legal sector, based on a behavioural definition. **12% of male respondents** had experienced sexual harassment.

### When did the incidents of sexual harassment occur?

**57%** of people said their most recent incident of sexual harassment occurred within the **last 5 years**. For **25%** of these respondents, it occurred within the **last 12 months**.

### Junior women are most vulnerable

**82%** of the respondents who personally experienced sexual harassment were **women**.

**59%** of respondents had less than 6 years experience in the legal sector at the time of the most recent incident.

**29%** held junior solicitor/lawyer roles, and **21%** had not yet completed their requisite period of supervised legal practice.

### What happens after someone is harassed?

**81%** of respondents did not report their experience. Some of the reasons for not reporting were that: 'it was easier to keep quiet' (**80%**); they believed 'it was a minor incident' (**66%**); and they lacked confidence in the system in place to address the incident (**59%**).

### When harassment is reported

For the small number of people who did report harassment to their organisations, **45%** were dissatisfied with the outcome. **41%** report having their complaint ignored or not taken seriously, **38%** reported being treated less favourably after reporting and **46%** felt there were no consequences for their harasser.

### Effects of harassment on the victim

**88%** of respondents who had experienced harassment reported at least one negative short-term effect, and almost half of respondents reported a negative long-term effect as a result of the harassment.

Short-term effects included discomfort and awkwardness in the workplace (**68%**), mental health issues or stress (**51%**) and a negative effect on self-esteem and confidence (**39%**).

Long-term effects included negative impact on relationship with colleagues (**35%**), long-term discomfort and awkwardness at work (**25%**), a negative effect on self-esteem and confidence (**17%**).

### Witnesses and bystanders

It is common to witness sexual harassment in a legal workplace or hear about it directly from someone affected by it (over **50%** of respondents), but uncommon to report it (**90%** of respondents in this position did not report what they saw or heard about).