

Radical Women Submission to HREOC: National Inquiry into Sexual Harassment in Australian Workplaces

Radical Women (RW) is a socialist feminist, working class women's organisation, founded in Australia in 1983 and the United States in 1967. RW members have worked across a wide range of industries — from teaching, health, community and public sector services to office work, retail, banking, hospitality and traditionally male-dominated trades. We, and the diverse grassroots communities we are part of, are multi-generational and multi-racial. We span sexuality and gender identity, and we are diversely abled.

For these reasons, RW finds that the HREOC's comprehensive September 2018 report on sexual workplace harassment reflects the experiences of our members and communities.

This submission will focus on what RW believes are the causes of sexual harassment in the workplace and ways to address it. Given the global nature of the problem, we will incorporate a similar experience in the U.S., where a dynamic campaign is taking place.

The report's attention to the harassment that certain groups are subjected to throughout their lives, as well as in their workplaces, is important. Femicide in Australia (69 in 2018 alone) is a shocking part of this picture. So is transgender murder: In November 2018, SBS reported nearly 3,000 transpeople killed worldwide over the previous decade — rising from 148 in 2008 to 358 in 2017. Two-thirds were sex workers.

HREOC's breakdown of statistics leaves no doubt about the misogyny, transphobia, homophobia, racism and anti-disability hatred that drive this harassment and violence. The question has to be: what's behind it?

Radical Women believes the source of the problem lies in the position of women in society. When private property and class divisions emerged some 5,000 years ago, women and children became the property of men. (The word "family" comes from the ancient "familia," meaning a household of servants or slaves ruled by the patriarch.) While feminist struggle has loosened patriarchy's iron grip, it still wields power. Marital rape in Australia wasn't criminalised in all states and territories until 1994. Last year's sentencing by the New South Wales Supreme Court of a man, who had burned his wife alive in the family home, to 36 years' imprisonment instead of life — because she was not a stranger to him — reminds us that the man's castle remains intact.

The residue of ownership also permeates the workplace, where the aligning of capitalism and patriarchy couldn't be clearer. Sexual bullying bolsters bosses' power by keeping women subordinate and workers intimidated. The HREOC report shows how this is done, not only by harassment but also by witnesses' reluctance to speak up. The pressure on male workers to be complicit undermines solidarity and the ability to organise.

As the report demonstrates with alarming statistics, solidarity fractures along the lines of sexuality, race and disability as well as gender.

Sexual harassment won't be erased until its systemic source is. We are not dealing with aberrant individuals but a capitalist system, which devalues and seeks to control women, people of colour and all workers.

#MeToo catapulted workplace sexual harassment to the forefront, but resistance has a long history. In Australia, it goes back to 1827, when inmates of Parramatta's Female Factory resisted the barbaric conditions, which included employers' sexual predation. Stated or not, sexual harassment has always been embedded in women's struggle for workplace equality.

For sexual harassment and violence to end, we need to eliminate gender discrimination and all forms of bigotry. Implementing affirmative action and equal pay, providing paid leave to recover from harassment, disability benefits for those who develop PTSD, for example, would be huge steps toward this.

These advances require organising in our workplaces and communities. Seattle, Washington offers an inspiring example. Seattle Silence Breakers, a grassroots campaign that started in February 2018, is winning changes on the job for women, people of colour and other targeted groups. Responding to a major employer's (Seattle City Light) sidelining of workers' complaints of sexual bullying, city employees, unionists, community members and Radical Women came together to end the widespread harassment, abuse and intimidation, and all forms of discrimination. Their demands include offering leave time to victims, moving the accused perpetrator to another worksite if the victim feels threatened and holding managers accountable for harassment. They are pushing for independence of the city's Office for Civil Rights from the mayor and City Council and empowering it to carry out investigations and enact system-wide changes. The City Council is now considering modifications to the Seattle Codes dealing with sexual harassment. While the campaign is far from over, this shows the power of bold, tenacious organising by workers and the community.

Unions have a key role to play, and the entire labour movement needs to be involved. First, sexual harassment crosses industries. Second, unions have the collective industrial power to hold employers to account and to create an environment of respect and solidarity in the workplace.

The steady rise of workplace sexual harassment is part of the escalation of misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, racism, ableism and worker exploitation — on a global scale. All this coincides with the plummeting economy, social polarisation and advances of the far right. Strong women-led unions, that unite our workplaces and communities, would turn the tables and empower us all to erase harassment, bigotry and exploitation from our jobs and our lives.

Submitted by Debbie Brennan
for Radical Women
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