



27 February 2019

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Submission – Inquiry into Sexual Harassment in Australian Workplaces

The South Australian Premier's Council for Women (the Council) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry.

The Council is a high-level independent advisory body. We advise the Premier of South Australia and the Minister for Human Services on issues relating to women to facilitate a whole of government approach to meeting the needs of women in South Australia. The views expressed in this submission are those of the Council and do not represent those of the South Australian Government.

We are deeply concerned about the recent statistics which showed that which women have long known, and that is sexual harassment of women is still occurring at distressing rates in Australian workplaces. It is sad to see how many men are also suffering the same treatment although the Council recognises that this is a gendered issue that effects more women than men and often women experience harassment at a more serious level.

Our Council members come from a variety of organisations across the State, and regularly, in our meetings, the topic of sexual harassment has arisen. Particularly in the past two years, various incidents of sexual harassment which have been reported to or witnessed by our members, have been discussed at a large number of our meetings.

This is an issue we are aware affects women disproportionately to men, and we see some similar patterns to the conduct, and the treatment of victims, as we do in the area of other forms of violence against women, particularly domestic and family violence. On our Council we have a number of experts who have worked in the domestic and family violence sector for decades, and we draw these similarities from this experience. In particular, we highlight the backlash experienced by women as victims, and victim-blaming. Similarly, the solutions are similar, we need to see cultural change based on fundamental principles of respect for one another. We need to build this culture of respect by educating people on respectful language. We need to educate bystanders on how, and when to intervene. We need support for victims, and we need to stop silencing victims with confidentiality agreements.

As with domestic violence initiatives there is a need for bystander training, where members of the community witnessing sexual harassment are empowered to call out the harasser, and we need to believe victims. Too often women victims of sexual harassment are silenced by their workplaces Human Resource policies or by superiors who warn women not to jeopardise their careers. It should not be a matter of choosing between being sexually harassed or losing your career.

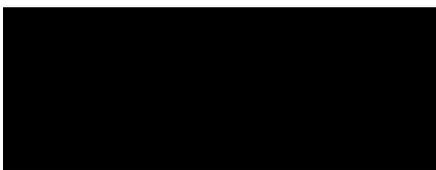
When considered alongside the fact that more women work in casualised or underemployed workforces and in less secure work it is disheartening to think that sexual harassment may also be causing women to find themselves choosing to 'put up with it' rather than taking a stand and risking losing their job. We understand that the law provides avenues for complaint in South Australia, yet it is hard to imagine that women would not face consequences for speaking up as we have seen all too often recently in the media. It is important that everyone is protected by satisfactory laws but even more important is that our workforce is educated in the nature and effect on victims of sexual harassment and Australian workplaces become places where harassment is not tolerated.

Recently the Council has spent time discussing sexual harassment as it affects the volunteer workforce. We understand that in South Australia volunteers are protected and able to make a complaint about sexual harassment under our state laws, however, this is not so under Commonwealth, Northern Territory or Western Australian law which creates a serious gap in protections for many Australian volunteers. It is not acceptable that a volunteer could find herself without recourse if she experiences sexual harassment in a workplace. This is unacceptable for volunteers and bad for our community which relies heavily on the volunteer workforce. It must be made clear by all jurisdictions that sexual harassment of any person, whether paid or unpaid, will not be tolerated in Australian workplaces.

At its most basic sexual harassment is an ongoing form of disrespect to women that continues cultural norms regarding women's bodies and sexual commodification of women in our society. This is a cultural, social, systemic issue and sexual harassment in the workplace is one of the ways it manifests.

Thank you for considering this submission. We look forward to seeing the results of your inquiry and working with you toward ending sexual harassment in all workplaces.

Yours sincerely



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Chair

Premier's Council for Women

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