

Sexual Harassment in the Legal Profession: Findings from the 2025 Victorian Lawyer Census

Research Brief

Victorian Legal Services
BOARD + COMMISSIONER

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Overview

In 2019, the Victorian Legal Services Board and Commissioner (VLSB+C) published research revealing that 1 in 3 legal professionals had experienced sexual harassment in the workplace. The findings prompted significant regulatory and industry responses, including awareness campaigns, training initiatives, and enhanced reporting mechanisms. The 2025 Victorian Lawyer Census revisited this critical issue with 1,887 lawyers responding. The results reveal that sexual harassment remains as prevalent today as it was in 2019.¹

Little has changed in 5 years

Over one-third (34%) of lawyers have experienced sexual harassment during their careers to date, while 44% have witnessed it. In the past 12 months, 10% experienced harassment, statistically unchanged from 8% in 2019.

Vulnerability follows familiar patterns

Sexual harassment is underpinned by clear patterns of vulnerability and power. Young women early in their careers faced far greater risk, with 21% reporting harassment in the past year. More generally, female lawyers experienced harassment at more than three times the rate of male counterparts (13% versus 4%).

Marginalised groups faced elevated risks of sexual harassment. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lawyers, LGBTQIA+ lawyers, and those with long-term illnesses or disabilities all reported higher rates. Conversely, structural advantages are associated with lower rates, with partners and senior practitioners experiencing significantly less harassment. Patterns show that sexual harassment follows existing hierarchies of power and advantage within the profession.

The everyday nature of harassment

Sexually suggestive comments and jokes emerged as the most common form of harassment, affecting nearly half of those who experienced any harassment. Inappropriate staring and leering affected 29%, while unwanted touching affected 19%. More severe forms, including non-consensual sexual activity, remained comparatively rare but were not absent from the profession.

Critically, the majority of harassment occurred within office spaces (45%) and took place in person (84%). When considered alongside the percentage of behaviour witnessed, this suggests that problematic behaviours are often overt, occurring in shared professional environments. Sexual harassment is happening in plain sight, yet remains largely unchallenged.

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Perpetrators protected by position

Over half of those who experienced sexual harassment identified the perpetrator as a colleague within their organisation, with 73% indicating this person was more senior to them. This power imbalance creates significant barriers to reporting and accountability. Perpetrators also included barristers, clients, judges, and spanned multiple workplace contexts.

Respondents described a culture where senior figures are shielded from accountability, ‘partners are protected’ and ‘revenue is more valuable than the experience of more junior women’. One lawyer noted: ‘There was little point in solicitors complaining about counsel. There is even less point in complaining about judges’.

The silence that persists

A persistent concern is how rarely sexual harassment is formally reported and the barriers that deter reporting. Despite harassment affecting one in three lawyers (over their careers to date), 84% did not make any formal complaint about their most recent incident. Among those harassed in the past 12 months, only 9% made a formal report. Of the small number who did report, only 17% were entirely satisfied with the outcome.

Respondents provided stark explanations for not reporting harassment. Many described sexual harassment as normalised within legal workplaces, as ‘just part of the job’, making complaints feel futile. Concerns about career repercussions also featured prominently, with respondents indicating that reporting ‘could place [my] career in jeopardy’, or as a ‘career limiting move’. Young lawyers felt particularly vulnerable, with one noting ‘the reputational impact for an early career lawyer would be impossible to come back from’.

Systemic failures also deterred reporting. Respondents expressed deep scepticism about complaint mechanisms, describing them as ‘toothless’ and noting that ‘the victim is the only person who loses when a formal complaint is made’. Some lawyers, drawing on their professional expertise, appeared to apply legal definitions to their own experiences, concluding that while behaviours made them uncomfortable, they fell short of legal thresholds and therefore did not warrant reporting. In this way, legal expertise appeared to deter reporting, with behaviours dismissed as legally insufficient.

A cost that is real and measurable

Sexual harassment exacts a significant toll on those who experience it. Lawyers who experienced harassment in the past 12 months showed more than double the rate of severe psychological distress (27% versus 12%) and more than double the rate of high burnout risk compared to their peers. They reported significantly lower satisfaction across every measured life domain – physical health, personal relationships, work, financial situation, and life as a whole.

The path forward

The persistence of sexual harassment at unchanged rates since 2019 demonstrates that the problem is cultural and systemic, requiring coordinated action across the sector.

Effective responses require collaboration among regulatory and professional bodies, and engagement across all settings in which lawyers work. The prevalence of openly occurring harassment indicates the need for sustained investment in behavioural interventions and bystander training, seeking to shift attitudes and adherence to norms which sustain and normalise low-level forms of harassment which in turn enable more serious behaviours.

Annual monitoring through the Victorian Lawyer Census will track trends and evaluate intervention effectiveness. Targeted research is also needed to better understand profession-specific reporting barriers, including how legal expertise may lead lawyers to dismiss harmful experiences as legally insufficient, and why witnessed harassment persists unchallenged.

Most critically, the profession must move beyond treating sexual harassment as an individual problem requiring individual solutions and confront it as a systemic failure requiring collective accountability and sustained institutional change.

1. For the full report, see King, A.C., Rychner, G., Balmer, N.J & Lawson D. (2025). *Sexual Harassment in the Legal Profession: Findings from the 2025 Victorian Lawyer Census*. Melbourne: Victorian Legal Services Board and Commissioner.