

## Research Brief

### *Accounting for the Diversity of Women's Experiences in Surveys*

#### Introduction

Sexual harassment of women in the workplace has received growing attention in the past decade and is recognised as a substantial human rights and public health issue, with significant ramifications for workplaces and communities (Willness, Steel & Lee 2007). Nationally, this is reflected in recent legislative amendments:

- In 2022, the *Anti-Discrimination and Human Rights Legislation Amendment (Respect at Work) Act 2022 (Cth)*, introduced a positive duty on employers and persons conducting business or undertaking (PCBUs).
- In 2023, the Fair Work Act was amended to prohibit sexual harassment in the workplace, and is now considered as a form of 'serious misconduct'.

These efforts reflect a commitment to eliminating gender-based violence and harassment, and ensuring safe working environments for women.

Underpinning and driving these efforts for change is the growing body of research that have sought to bridge the significant gaps in current knowledge pertaining to sexual harassment in the workplace. This includes studies examining the impacts of workplace sexual harassment (Birinxhikai & Guggisberg 2017), its risk factors, preventative measures and responses (Champions of Change Coalition 2021, Healey 2018, Saunders & Eastaer 2013, Wynen 2016), and issues around underreporting (MacDermott 2020, Charlesworth, McDonald & Cerise 2011).

Since 2003, the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) has also regularly conducted national surveys into workplace sexual harassment, with the fifth iteration released in 2022. The survey has offered important insights and data on the prevalence and nature of workplace sexual harassment in Australia. However, there remain significant gaps in accounting for the breadth of diversity and intersectionality of women's experiences of violence and harassment. Specifically, migrant and refugee women were captured only through a single variable of 'language spoken at home.'

This gap has prompted the development of an ANROWS-funded study (ANROWS 2022) focusing on migrant and refugee women's experiences of sexual harassment in the workplace. Utilising a mixed-methods approach of large-scale surveys, focus groups and interviews, the study builds on existing knowledge of workplace sexual harassment to further contribute to the national picture of the diverse experiences of migrant and refugee women.

This research brief maps out the role, contribution and limitations of utilising large-scale surveys in gender-based violence research in Australia, specifically in relation to workplace sexual harassment.

#### Utilising surveys in gender-based violence research

Quantitative survey data can help build a critical evidence base for the prevalence and frequency of gender-based violence, at different times, in different locations, groups, policy regimes and social formations. Surveys are thus important data collection instruments in capturing and identifying the patterns and processes by which such violence occurs (Bryman 2016, Scott 2010).

Increasingly, feminist researchers utilising surveys to capture gender-based violence and sexual harassment in Australia can be seen in recent research outputs including the 2018 Women and the Future of Work report, the 2020 Migrant and Refugee Women's Safety Survey and the 2021 National Student Safety Survey. These studies have been critical in building an evidence base pertaining to the prevalence of violence and harassment, particular amongst certain groups, such as migrant and refugee women. The increasing use of surveys in gender-based violence research broadens opportunities to engage with policymakers, as they offer a language that speaks to policy development, funding priorities and legislative reforms.

Given the importance of surveys as both data collection instruments and platforms for advocacy work, the data collected in surveys should be 'relevant to the concepts of gender and violence being interrogated' (Walby & Towers, 2017), in addition to capturing measures of diversity that may intersect with these experiences such as language spoken at home, migration status and country of birth. Such data and analysis must then consider how gender intersects with multiple, intersecting and complex influences on violence and disadvantage (Scott 2010). However, to date, surveys exploring workplace sexual harassment and gender-based violence, more broadly, do not sufficiently account for the breadth of diversity in women's experiences of victimisation.

#### Capturing diversity in surveys

The contemporary Australian population is multicultural. In 2021, approximately 33% of the population were born overseas, and approximately 24.8% of the population reported speaking a language other than English at home (ABS 2022). It is therefore paramount that surveys can reflect the diversity of our population. Yet, the extent to which factors such as ethnicity, sexuality, disability, age, class and migration status have been integrated into the gender, violence and abuse research agenda to date is questionable (Westmarland & Bows 2018).

More recently, the overshadowing of migrant and refugee women in major national studies and national commitments on gender-based violence has also been identified as a particular issue. For example, a content analysis of Australian media in 2020 found that a majority of reports on violence against women from culturally diverse backgrounds did not mention 'intersectional' factors such as race, class, caste, age, sexuality or ability – factors which can mediate women's experiences of violence or help-seeking (Rodrigues 2022).

In many of the Australian national surveys, including the AHRC's 2022 National Survey on Sexual Harassment in Australian workplaces, 'language spoken at home' is the singular variable to capture the sample of migrant and refugee women. It is also not designed to capture data around the structural insecurities of temporary visa holders or how insecure migration status can be used to exploit and harass workers (Berg & Farbenblum 2020, Segrave, Wickes & Keel 2021). However, as highlighted in the 2020 Migrant and Refugee Women's Safety Survey (Segrave, Wickes & Keel 2021), to account for the diversity of migrant and refugee women's experiences, it is important to utilise multiple variables, for example, detailed information regarding visa status, English-language proficiency and employment details.

Another challenge is ensuring that surveys are available in multiple languages so that they are accessible to participants who do not have a high-level of English-language proficiency. This requires a critical exploration of terms, concepts and question framing, particularly as definitions and understandings of violence and harm are shaped by socio-cultural backgrounds (Segrave, Wickes & Keel 2021).

For example, terms such as “workplace harassment” may not exist or translate clearly within some contexts (Liang et al 2005), and utilising different definitions of sexual harassment may yield differing responses. Research suggests that survey questions based on legal definitions of sexual harassment may result in underreporting, as respondents may not recognise their own experiences as violence or harassment (AHRC 2022, ILO-LRF-Gallup 2022).

It is thus vital to acknowledge the cultural nuances in how women from different contexts define, understand and respond to violence. Women’s experiences and perceptions of violence vary from culture to culture, and their definitions of violence are shaped by intersecting social, religious, class and cultural frameworks (Ghafournia 2011, Liang et al 2005). These cultural distinctions may have significant bearing on how international survey data is interpreted or compared across regions or demographics; what is understood to be violence or harassment in one context may be considered inconsequential in others (ILO-LRF-Gallup 2022).

## Conclusion

Survey instruments play an increasingly important role in gender-based violence research. The need for surveys, and in particular, the need for surveys that can account for the diverse experiences of women in Australia cannot be understated. It is an especially critical undertaking given that nearly half the adult population in Australia are overseas born citizens, permanent residents or on temporary visas. Migrant and refugee women should not simply be an after-thought in gender-based violence research, but incorporated in its very foundation. As such, it is important that survey instruments are designed with the diversity of women’s experiences in mind.

But in utilising survey methodology with women from diverse communities, there are key ethical considerations to reflect on. Drawing from the lessons of past research, a key challenge for feminist researchers is recognising that individuals from marginalised communities may hold (understandable) reservations around provision of such data, particularly when such data has historically functioned “as a tool to stigmatise, pathologise and inflict harm” (Guyan 2022). Survey response categories are also a point of contention – questions around whether the Census should ask questions on ‘race’ have been met with warnings that such categories can “reinforce racial thinking and perpetuate racializing practices” (Malhi 2022). Indeed, questions around what constitutes ethnicity, race, and culture are inherently contextual, fluid, contested and political (Malhi 2022). This points to the importance of interrogating the nature and consequences of the categories used within quantitative research.

While sub-group specific surveys are a positive step forward in capturing the diverse experiences of migrant and refugee women, and these are valuable resources in building a more detailed national picture, informing targeted engagement, and developing more responsive systems, it points to a critical limitation in national representative surveys. That is, migrant and refugee women remain largely overshadowed and invisible, even though they comprise of a significant proportion of the national population. National surveys need to do better in ensuring that they can comprehensively account for the experiences of this sample.

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