

Sexual harassment and customer abuse rife in retail, says Australian report

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Snapshot of retail industry statistics. Credit: *Gendered disrespect and inequality in retail work: A summary of findings* (2023).

One in five retail workers has been sexually harassed at work in the past five years, most commonly by a senior colleague or a customer, according to a new report from the University of Sydney and the Australia National University.

The study interrogates the experiences of women and men working in

Australia's second-largest industry employer, which accounts for about 10 percent of the country's labor force.

More than half of the retail workers surveyed considered customer abuse to be a problem in the workplace—a figure highest among women working part-time, and those in frontline roles.

The report, *Gendered disrespect and inequality in retail work*, draws on survey responses from 1,160 retail employees (conducted in September—October 2021), as well as in-depth interviews with 30 senior leaders in the retail industry (conducted between October 2020—April 2021).

Lead author Professor Rae Cooper, Director of the Gender Equality in Working Life research initiative, said the research revealed significant gaps between men's and women's experiences of, and attitudes toward, retail work.

"Despite being a workforce dominated by women, men are more likely to rise to the most senior positions in retail organizations."

"Women are vital to the success of retail; they account for 57 percent of the retail workforce and make up approximately 75 percent of consumer spending decisions in families. Yet they remain severely under-represented in senior leadership roles within the retail industry, holding only 27 percent of board positions and 17 percent of chief executive officer roles."

Inadequate training and a lack of support from senior leaders and boards were viewed as barriers to addressing these behaviors.

The survey of retail workers revealed gender-based disparities between work experiences. Women were more likely to believe customer abuse

was a problem and less likely to believe incidents were adequately addressed.

"Women are the frontline workers of retail, helping to meet [customer needs](#), but also bearing the brunt of customer-perpetrated abuse and harassment," said report chief investigator Dr. Meraiah Foley from the University of Sydney Business School.

Inadequate training and a [lack of support](#) from senior leaders and boards were viewed as barriers to addressing these behaviors.

Women were also less likely to perceive they have [equal access](#) to [leadership roles](#) and that their voice is heard in relation to important matters at work.

Julia Fox, National Assistant Secretary of the Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees' Association said, "Our members have long had to confront shopper aggression and addressing the problem is an SDA priority, but the fact that so many of our predominantly female members also suffer sexual harassment from within their workplaces is frankly shocking."

"This research reaffirms the lack of respect for women working in retail. The retail industry continues to fail its female dominated workforces who are subjected to disgracefully high levels of customer abuse, violence and sexual harassment."

"Their skills and capabilities are undervalued and unrecognized. In 2023 we still see that because of the lack of genuine career opportunities, women are under-represented in management and leadership positions in what is a female dominated industry," said Fox.

Action needed at executive level

Retail is predicted to remain a major employer of Australians, particularly [young people](#), women, and people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds—all of whom are more vulnerable to customer abuse.

Professor Cooper said it is incumbent on employers to provide adequate training on how to address and prevent gendered abuse and harassment in retail workplaces—and that change would also require a shift in attitude.

"The undervaluation of retail work is a significant problem for the industry. This is reflected in low pay and a lack of recognition of retail skills and capabilities."

"Retail work has changed considerably in the past decade and workers need considerable skill to undertake their roles, yet research suggests workers in retail do not feel valued and respected. This disrespect contributes to the persistent issues of [sexual harassment](#) and customer abuse, particularly directed at [women](#).

"An inherent power imbalance exists in the retail industry. Strong action must be taken to address this imbalance and improve workplace civility and respect in the sector."

More information: Report: www.sydney.edu.au/content/dam/...y-in-retail-work.pdf

Provided by University of Sydney

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