Experiences of Sexism, Discrimination and Inequality in Australian Universities: Preliminary Report

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CONTENTS

Executive Summary

Research in different national contexts continues to show that academic women still experience job insecurity, intensifications in the demands of teaching and service, expectations that they will undertake substantial emotional labour, reduced opportunities for (and recognition of) research, regular and damaging experiences of everyday sexism, and both direct and indirect discrimination (Probert, 2005; Hamilton et al., 2022; Winchester & Browning, 2015). Challenging the persistence of these norms has proven to be extremely difficult. The constant evolution of gendered beliefs and a sense that gender issues have been addressed for many decades makes it difficult for researchers seeking a clear picture of women's current experiences to rely on simple measures of gender equity (such as the whole of organisation surveys) when trying to understand both the current lived realities of women in universities and the needs of today's women.

To address these challenges, this pilot project, supported by the Gender Equality Research Network (GERN) at Griffith University and the Griffith Institute for Educational Research (GIER) investigates the current experiences of female and non-binary academics in Australian universities and how their professional and personal lives are impacted by gendered experiences. While our focus is on gender, we want our data to adequately capture the experiences of diverse people who identify as women and/or gender diverse. This report presents a selection of the early findings.

The results reveal an alarming rate of everyday sexism experienced in Australian universities. More than 90% of our respondents have had gender-based assumptions made about their career, role, capability and/or interest. They have been looked over for career opportunities (88%), mansplained (86%) and talked over in meetings (90%). These experiences of everyday sexism occurred often and frequently to more than half of the respondents.

Diving deeper into our respondents' workplace environment, 83% reported that their administrative and teaching work encroaches on their research time, and nearly 70% stated that they were expected to be nurturing in their workplaces. Three quarters of the respondents felt that the responsibility of educating others and teaching students about gender has fallen on them. When compared to their male colleagues, more than 70% of respondents reported that they must work harder to get the same credibility and half reported being paid less for the same work.

When it comes to leadership, 96% were mindful of their communication approach when exercising authority at work. More than 90% of respondents have felt unheard and ignored, and their authority was challenged. 86% of them reported that they have been disrespected in the workplace and more than 80% of them have been "put in their place". It is not surprising that these women were cautious about self-promotion at work (71%) and downplayed their accomplishments when speaking to others (78%), while half of them waited to be acknowledged before speaking in a meeting.

When reflecting on their gendered experience in connection to their other social identities such as race, age and disability where relevant, more than 80% felt that they have been excluded from networking opportunities and have been assumed not to have much to contribute to the conversation. Their silence tended to be considered as a sign of compliance by others.

Gender-based discrimination has serious negative impacts on the respondents' employment, career progression and finances. For 70% of the respondents, this has also impacted their general wellbeing and mental health, including lowered self-esteem and confidence. The impact on physical health is also evident for nearly 60% of the respondents.

Half of the respondents have experienced sexual harassment. The results reveal a concerning prevalence of sexual harassment with nearly half of the victims experiencing it more than once and 38% more than five times. The occurrence of sexual assault was at a much lower rate and yet, 11 respondents have been sexually assaulted. The most common offenders in both sexual harassment and assault were senior co-workers. The reporting rate was extremely low (18% for harassment and 13% for assault). The main reasons for not

reporting include concerns of being seen as over-reacting and fear of being negatively impacted on their career. For sexual harassment victims, they also felt that the incidents were not serious enough to be reported and nothing would change from reporting. For sexual assault victims, victim blaming was another reason for not reporting.

Despite all these, there is an equal split among the respondents in their outlook of whether gender-based challenges can be overcome in their workplaces. This preliminary report concluded with selected stories from our respondents and their advice for other female and non-binary academics.

More findings from the project and policy recommendations will be released later this year.

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Hamilton, M., Williams, A., & Baird, M. (2022). Gender inclusive practices and work-life balance in Australian Universities. A Report for Universities Australia. University of Sydney: Sydney. https://universitiesaustralia.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Gender-inclusive-practices-and-work-life-balance-in-Australian-universities_Dec-2022.pdf

Probert, B. (2005). 'I just couldn't fit it in': Gender and unequal outcomes in academic careers. *Gender, Work & Organization*, *12*(1), 50-72. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0432.2005.00262.x

Winchester, H. P., & Browning, L. (2015). Gender equality in academia: A critical reflection. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, *37*(3), 269-281. https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2015.1034427

Method

Using a quantitative research design with online self-administered surveys, this pilot project investigated the current experiences of academic women in Australian universities and how their professional and personal lives are impacted by workplace responses to gender and sexism.

The survey encompasses nine sections: demographics, everyday sexism, workplace environment, leadership, intersectionality, impacts of gender-based discrimination, sexual harassment, sexual assault, the outlook for overcoming gender-based challenges, and the respondents' stories and messages for others. The survey questions were mainly drawn from but not limited to the following studies:

- Australian Human Rights Commission. (2018). *Everyone's business: Fourth national survey on sexual harassment in Australian workplaces*. http://www.humanrights.gov.au/about/publications/
- Diehl, A. B., Stephenson, A. L., Dzubinski, L. M., & Wang, D. C. (2020). Measuring the invisible: Development and multi-industry validation of the gender bias scale for women leaders. *Human Resource Development Quarterly, 31.* 249-280. doi: 10.1002/hrdq.21389
- Lewis, J. A., Neville, H. A. (2015) Construction and initial validation of the Gendered Racial Microaggressions Scale for Black women. *J Couns Psychol, 62*(2). 289-302. doi: 10.1037/cou0000062.
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- Mercer-Mapstone, L., Fatnowna, T., Ross, P., Bricknell, L., Mude, W., Wheat, J., Barone, R. P., Martinez, D. E., West, D., Gregory, S. J., Vanderlelie, J., McLaughlin, T., Kennedy, B., Able, A., Levy, P., Banas, K., Gabriel, F., Pardo, A., & Zucker, I. (2022). *Recommendations for equitable student support during disruptions to the higher education sector: Lessons from COVID-19.* National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education. https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/publications/equitable-student-support-disruptions-higher-education-covid-19/
- Torres-Harding, S. R., Andrade, A. L., & Diaz C. E. R. (2012). The Racial Microaggressions Scale (RMAS): A new scale to measure experiences of racial microaggressions in people of color. *Cultur Divers Ethnic Minor Psychol, 18*(2). 153-164. doi: 10.1037/a0027658

The survey was first piloted with 30 academics in September 2022, followed by an official launch in October 2022 that ran until May 2023. A total of 420 responses were collected. 244 responses have been coded as substantially complete, noting that respondents had the option to skip questions that were not relevant, or sections they felt might cause distress (e.g. comments about sexual harassment or assault). This preliminary report is based on the 244 substantially completed responses, noting that the total number of responses to any individual question may be less than this. Subsequent publications will report on insights gained from the total dataset. We note here, and in the next section, that reporting on data relating to gender diversity and gender identity, from a survey that contains both qualitative and quantitative data requires multiple stages of analysis to ensure that respondents' answers are linked to their preferred gender identity. This work is ongoing, and there is the potential for a small variation in the numbers presented in this report.

We also acknowledge that this is a pilot study with limitations regarding sample size and reflection of population demographics. However, we remain committed to the overall objective of reporting on experiences of everyday sexism, discrimination, and harassment—stories that are too often ignored, overlooked and silenced, sometimes because of the difficulty of presenting data from a diverse group.

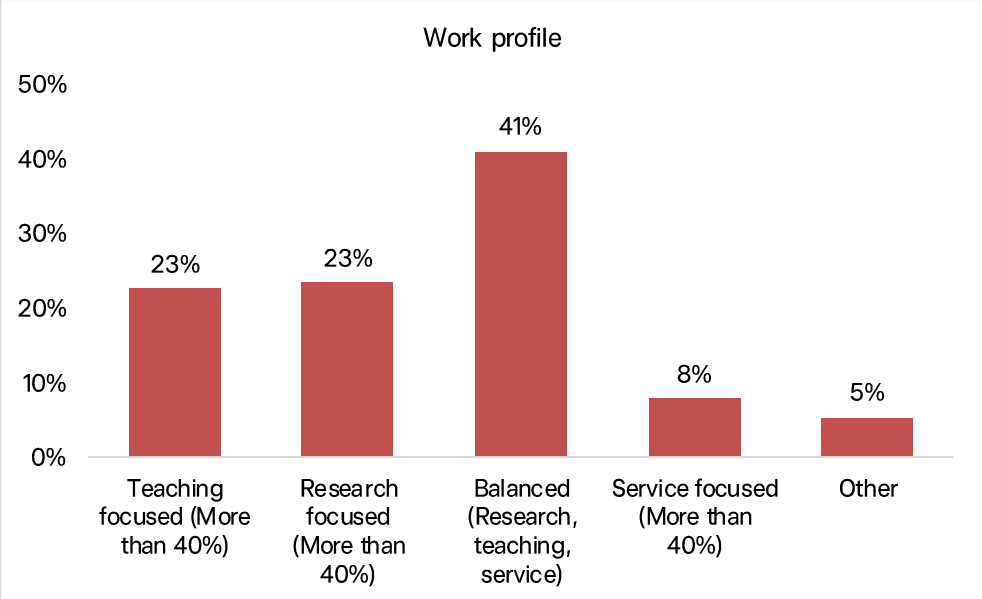
Respondent Profiles

The respondents of this survey consisted of diverse academic women. The majority of the respondents identified themselves as women, while 6% and 3% identified as non-binary and others. As outlined previously, analysing data that relates to gender identity takes careful work. In future reports, there may be minor adjustments made to the total number of respondents to particular questions if qualitative data clarifies an initial response to the demographic question regarding gender identity. We anticipate a possible variation of 1-2 respondents.

Information about the respondents' work profile, career length, employment contract and discipline are presented below.

Work Profile

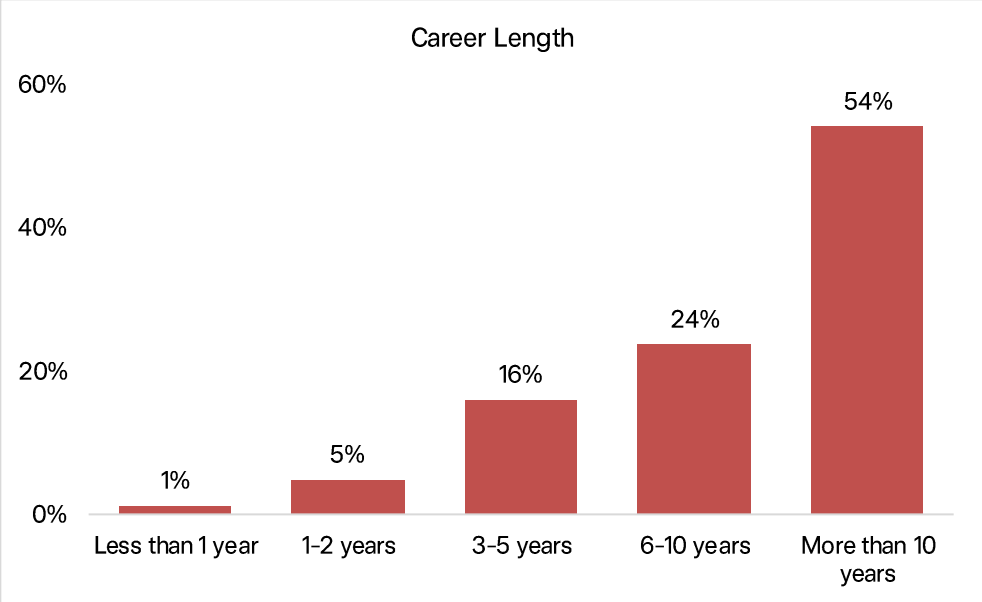
About 40% of respondents held a balanced research, teaching and service profile, while 23% of them were either teaching-focused or research-focused with only 8% being service-focused.



n = 244

Career Length

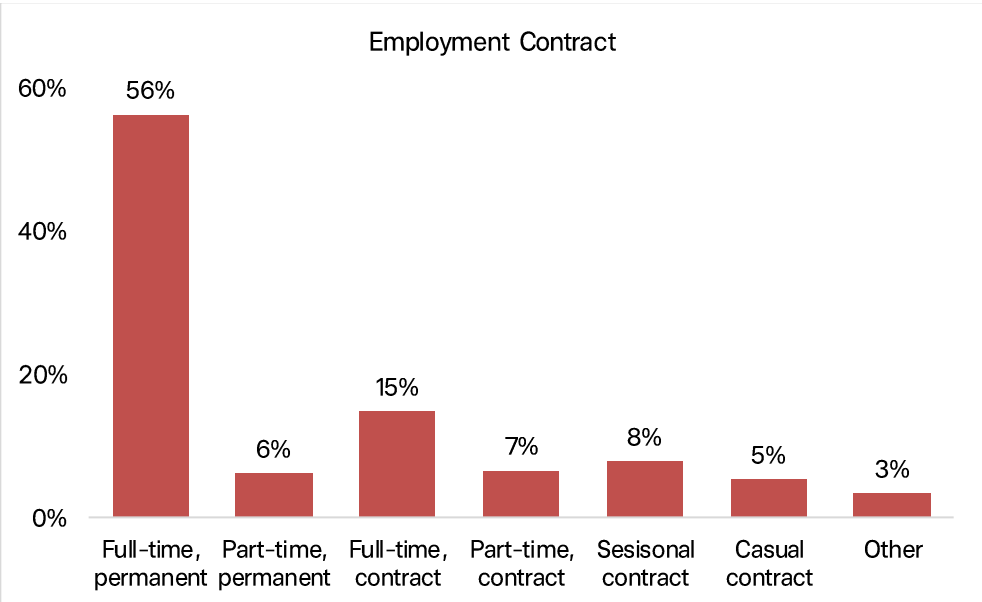
More than half of the respondents had worked in academia for more than 10 years. 24% of respondents had 6-10 years of experience and 22% were early career academics with less than 5 years of experience.



n = 244

Employment Contract

About half of the respondents had full-time, permanent employment. The remaining half consisted of full-time (contract), part-time (contract and permanent), sessional, casual and other (including HDR students, Post Doc, staff on sabbatical, retired and adjunct staff) types of employment.



n = 244

Disciplines

The respondents were mainly based in Arts and Social Science (42%), Education (18%), STEM (17%) and Health (16%).

Disciplines	Frequency	%
Arts and Social Science	102	42%
Education	43	18%
STEM	42	17%
Health	39	16%
Business	28	11%
Creative Arts	21	9%
Psychology	16	7%
Law	11	5%
Others	8	3%
Nursing	2	1%

Note: A respondent could select multiple disciplines. (n = 244)

Preliminary Findings

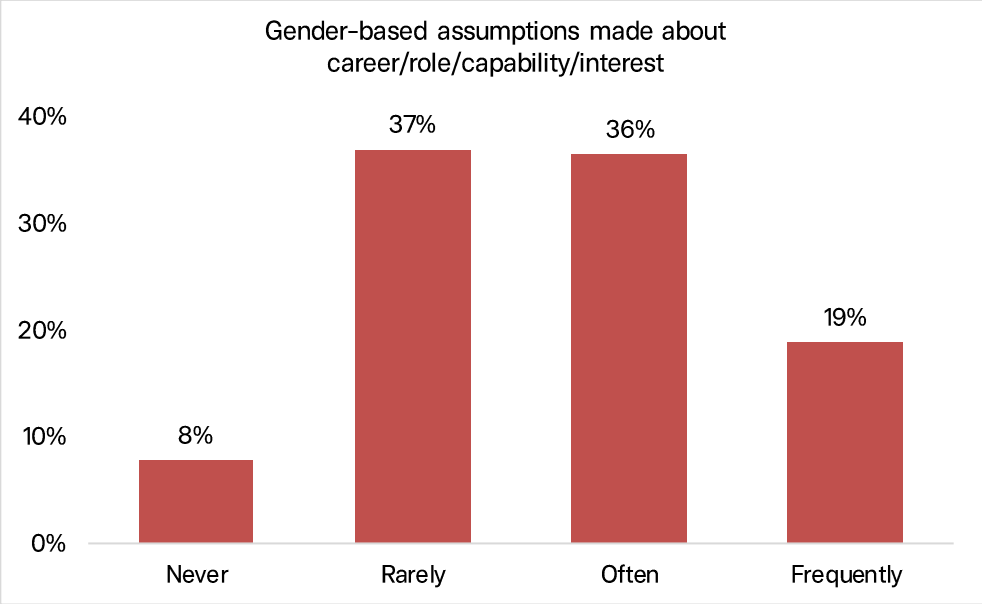
Everyday Sexism

The section on everyday sexism investigated the following themes:

- Assumptions made about your career/role/capability/interest based on gender.
- Missing out or being looked over for career opportunities because of gender.
- Insecure employment as a result of gender.
- Someone assumes you do not hold a senior role or that you are in a subordinate role to a male colleague.
- A man explaining something to you in detail.
- A man interrupting or talking over you in meetings.
- Being expected to be available to teach/research outside time compatible with your career/family commitments.
- Being expected to take on extra roles or leave cover because of not having children.

Assumptions made about your career/role/capability/interest

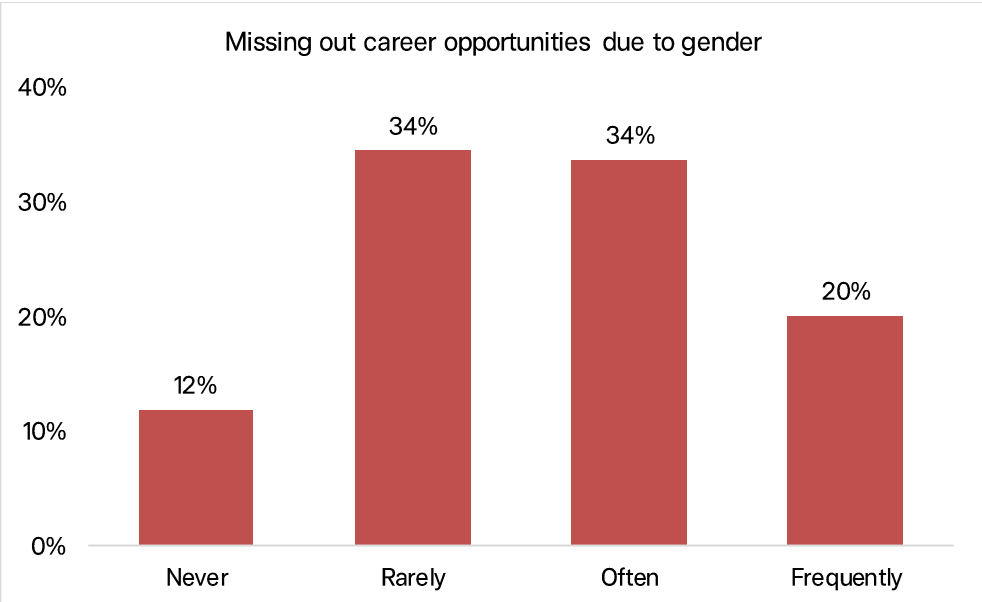
More than 90% of respondents reported that people had made assumptions about their career, role, capability and/or interest based on their genders. These gender-based assumptions occurred often or frequently to more than half of the respondents.



n = 244

Missing out or being looked over for career opportunities

88% of the respondents have missed out or been looked over for career opportunities because of their gender. This happened often or frequently to more than half of the respondents.



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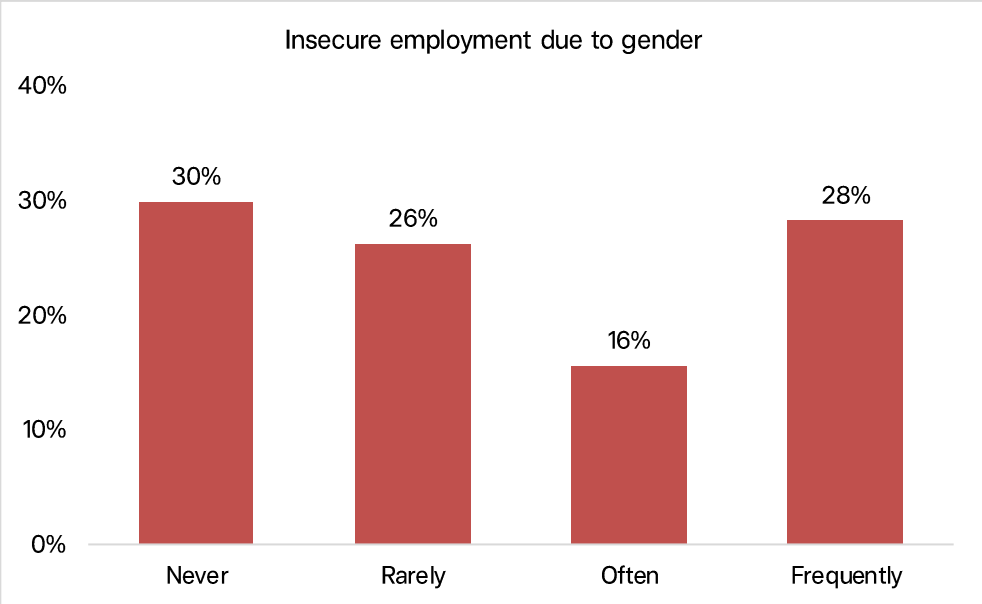
Insecure employment

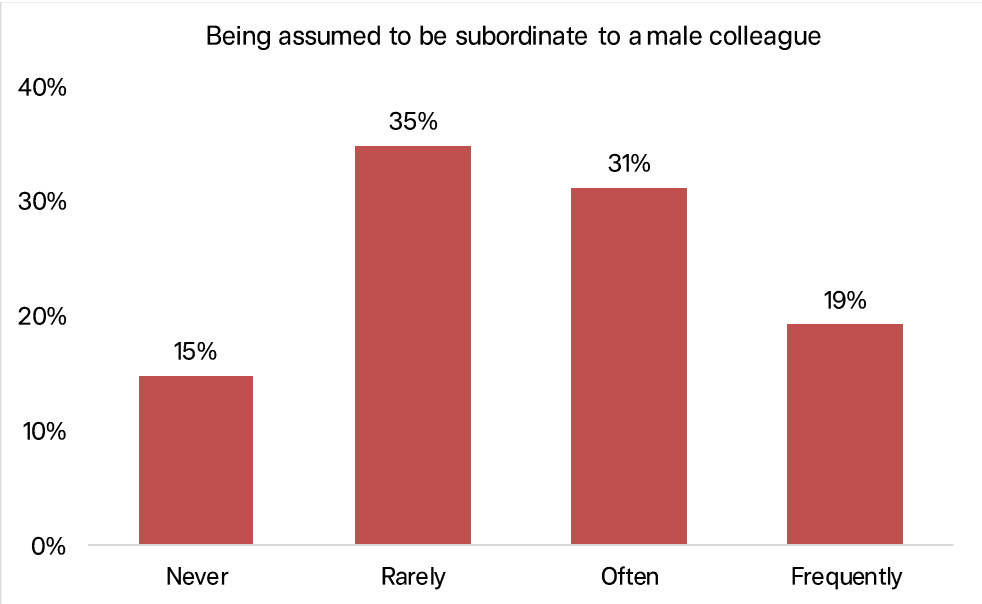
70% of the respondents have experienced insecure employment because of their gender.



n = 244

Subordinate assumption

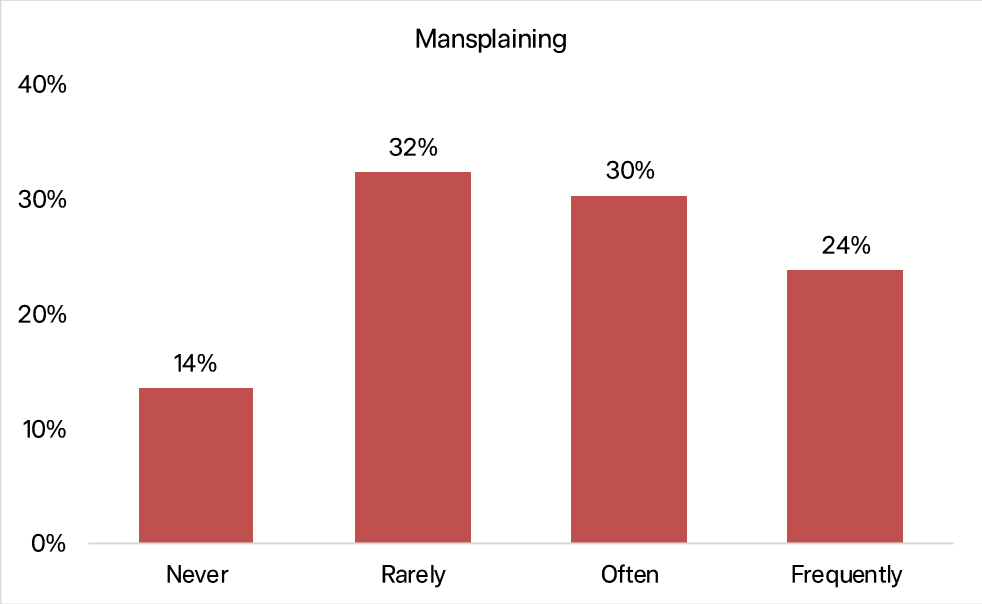
85% of respondents have experienced being assumed that they do not hold a senior role, or they are in a subordinate role to a male colleague because of their gender. This happened often or frequently to half of the respondents.



n = 244

Mansplaining

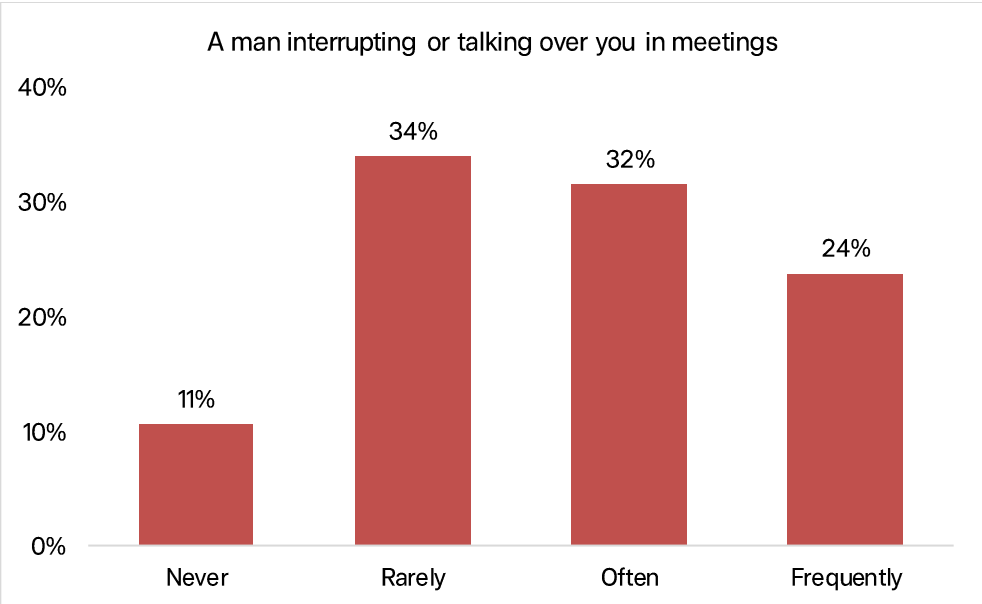
More than 86% of respondents have experienced mansplaining, where a man explains something to them in detail although they already have skills or knowledge about the issue. Again, this happened often or frequently to more than 54% of them.



n = 244

Being interrupted or talked over in meetings

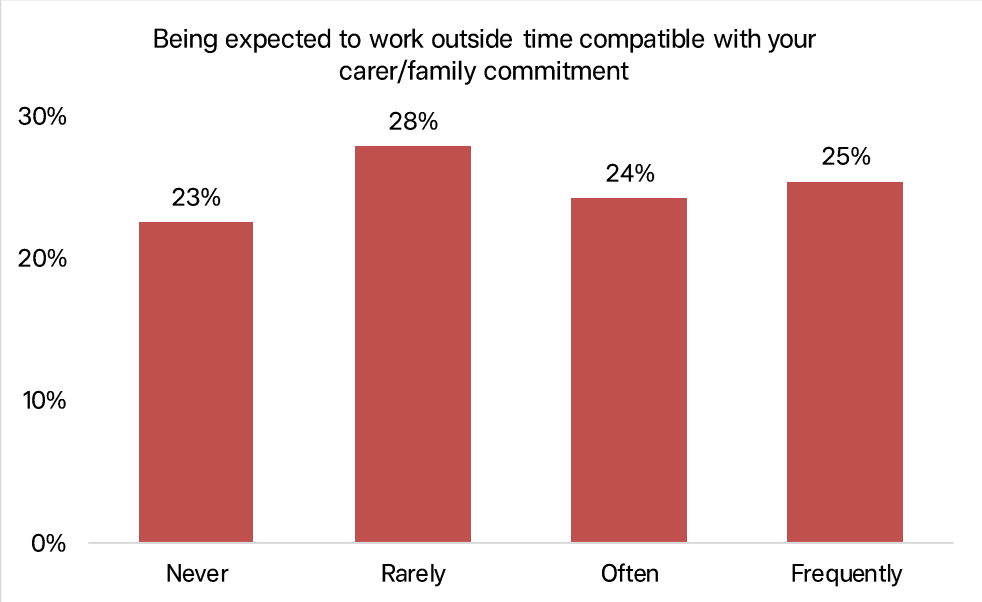
Nearly 90% of respondents have been interrupted or talked over by a man in meetings, with only 11% never experiencing it.



n = 244

Expected to work outside time compatible with carer/family commitments

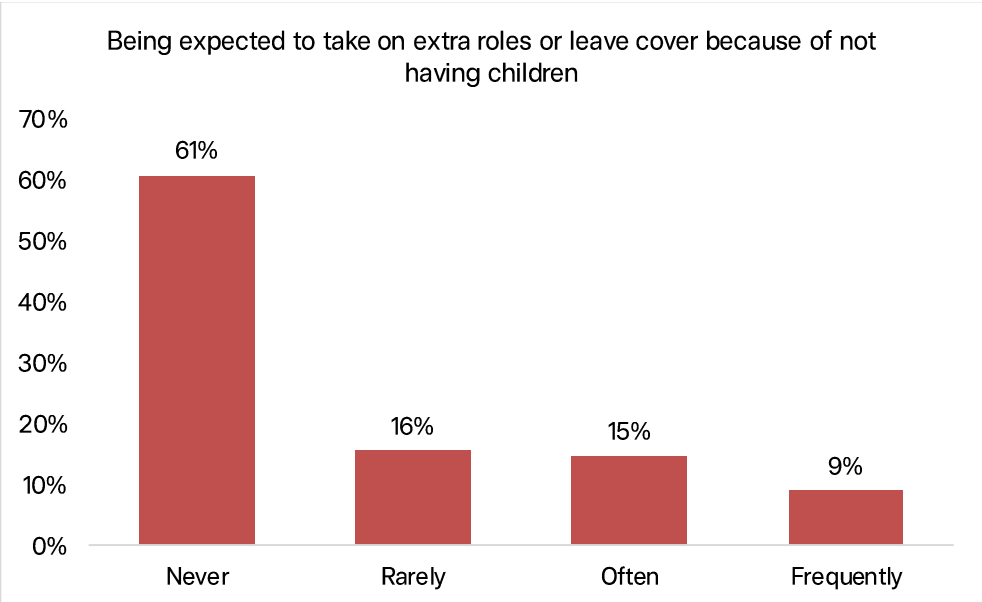
77% of respondents have been expected to be available to work (teach or research) outside time compatible with their carer/family commitment.



n = 244

Expected to take on extra roles or leave cover because of not having children

Although about two thirds of respondents (61%) have not been expected to take on extra roles or leave cover because of not having children, one third of the respondents have been expected to do so.



n = 244

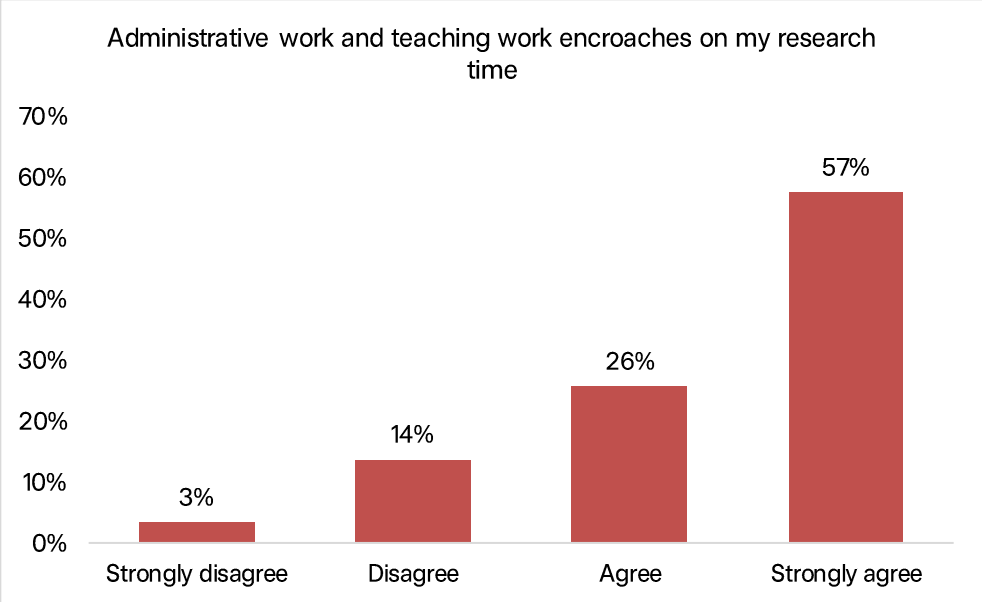
Workplace Environment

The section on workplace environment examined the following themes:

- Administrative work and teaching work encroach on research time.
- Being paid less than men doing the same work.
- Feeling responsible for educating others about what is acceptable behaviour regarding gender and identity at work.
- Being reprimanded/spoken rudely in public by a male colleague.
- The work associated with teaching students about gender.

Administrative and teaching work encroaches on research time

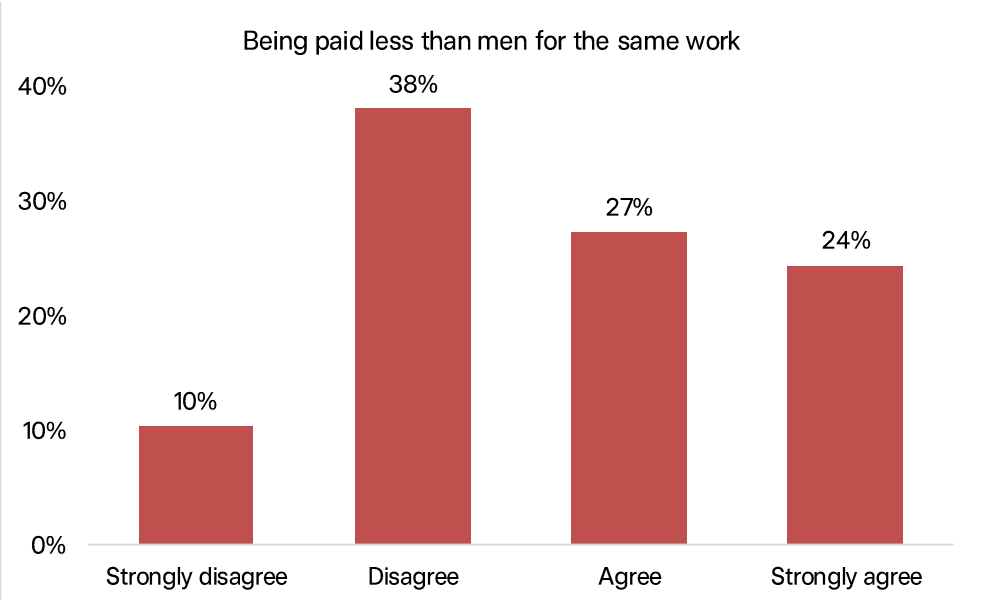
83% of the respondents reported that their administrative and teaching work encroaches on their research time. This statement was strongly agreed by nearly 60% of the respondents.



n = 242

Paid less than men doing the same work

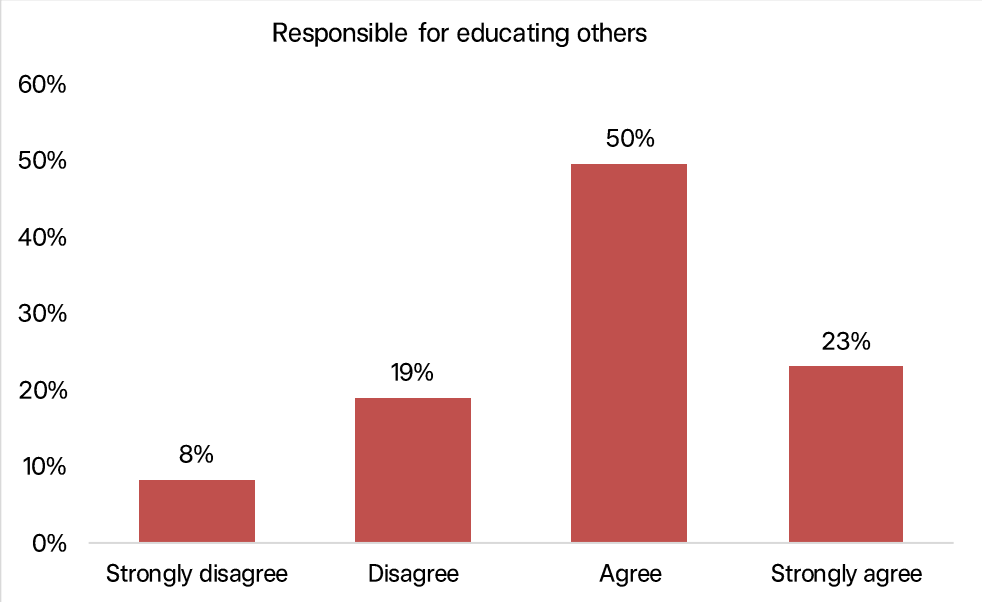
More than half of respondents (51%) were paid less than men for the same work.



n = 242

Being responsible for educating others about gender

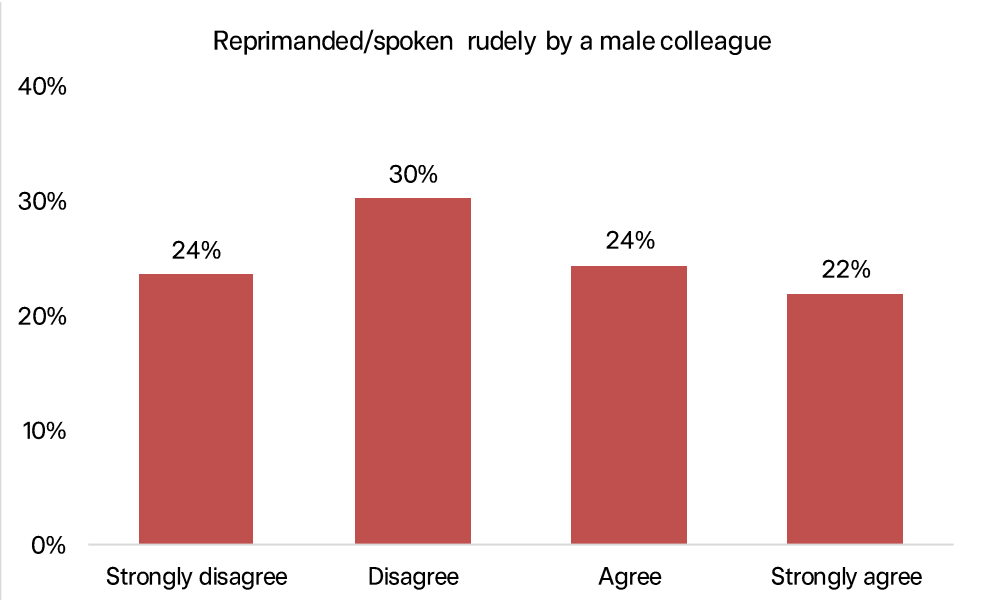
73% of respondents felt the responsibility of educating others about what was acceptable behaviour regarding gender and identity at work fell on them.



n = 242

Being reprimanded/spoken to rudely in public by a male colleague

Nearly half of the respondents (46%) had been reprimanded or spoken rudely to in public by a male colleague.



n = 242

The work associated with teaching students about gender

Half of the respondents reported that students in their schools/groups were not expected to be taught about gender. While the work associated with teaching students about gender is valued, 56% of the respondents reported that gender-focused teaching or discussion tended to be more challenging and 74% reported that the responsibility of teaching gender was primarily undertaken by women.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
In my school/group, it is not expected that students need to be taught about gender.	15%	35%	31%	19%
The work associated with teaching students about gender is primarily undertaken by women.	29%	45%	17%	9%
The work associated with teaching students about gender is valued.	9%	39%	35%	16%
Gender-focused teaching/discussions in the classroom/with students are more challenging or difficult compared to other topics that I teach.	15%	41%	38%	7%

n = 242

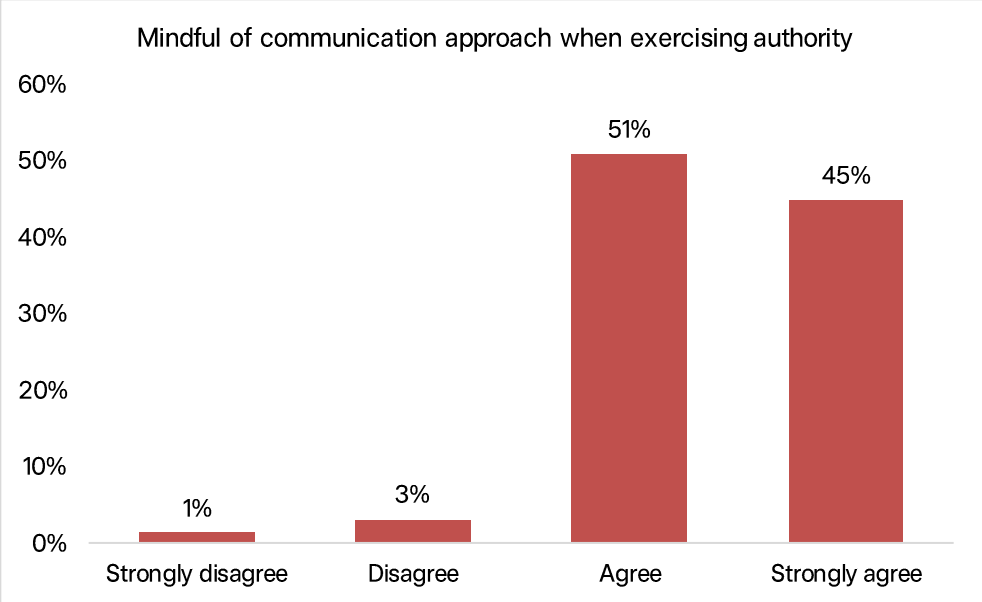
Leadership

Leadership in Universities takes many forms. People can hold positions of authority that have role descriptions (such as Head of School or Program Director). They can also exercise leadership in course development teams or research projects. This section investigated the following themes:

- Mindful communication approach when exercising authority at work.
- Waiting to be acknowledged before speaking in a meeting.
- Being cautious when self-promoting at work
- Downplaying accomplishments when speaking to others.
- Being scrutinised for job performance more closely than a man.
- Being expected to be nurturing at work
- Working harder than male colleagues for the same credibility.
- Expectation to exceed the achievements of male colleagues.

Being mindful of one's communication approach when exercising authority

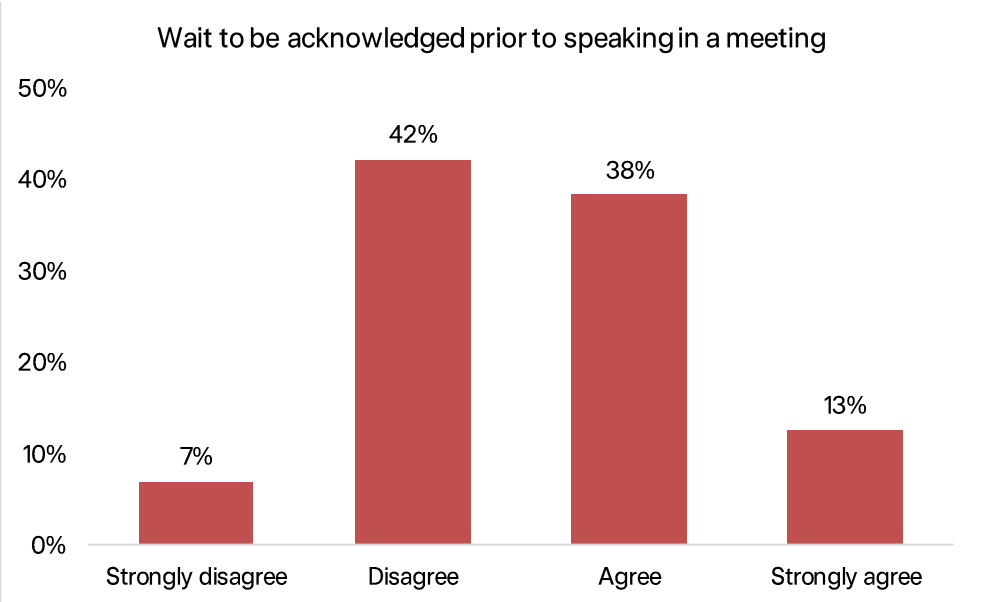
More than 96% of respondents were mindful of their communication approach when exercising authority at work.



n = 230

Wait to be acknowledged prior to speaking in a meeting

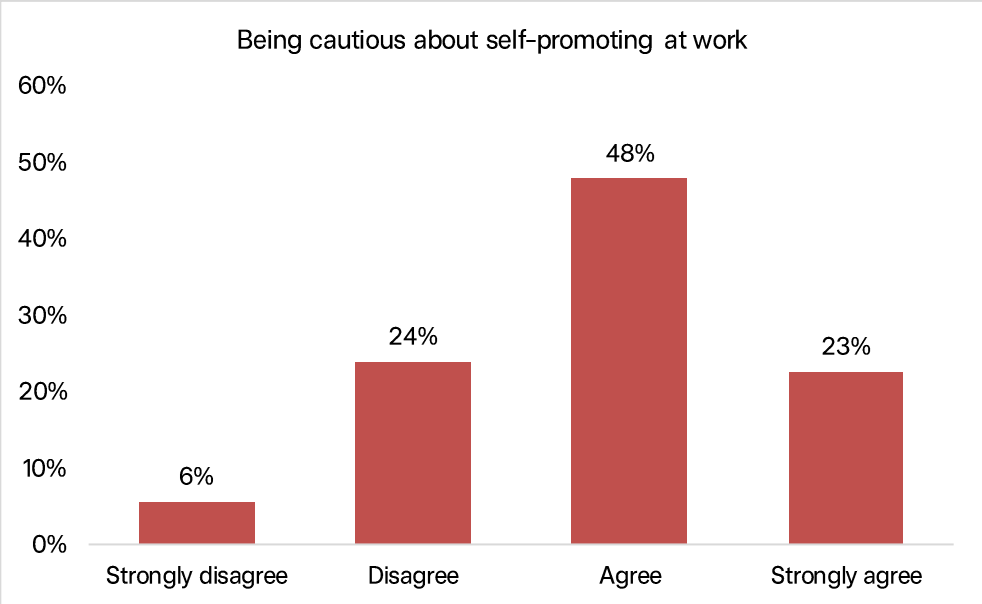
Half of the respondents (51%) have waited to be acknowledged before speaking in a meeting.



n = 230

Cautious when self-promoting at work

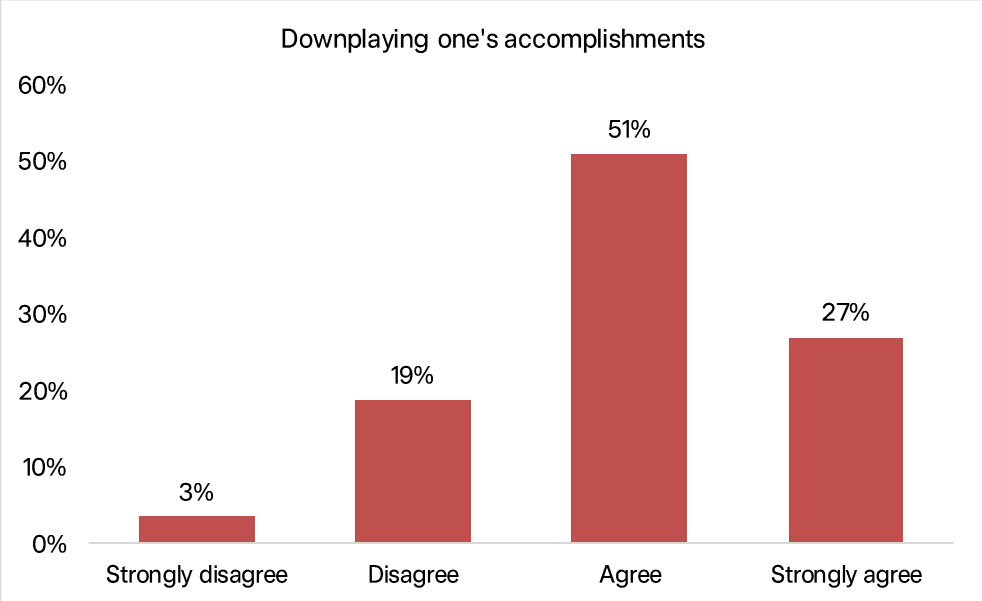
71% of respondents were cautious about self-promotion at work.



n = 230

Downplay one's accomplishments

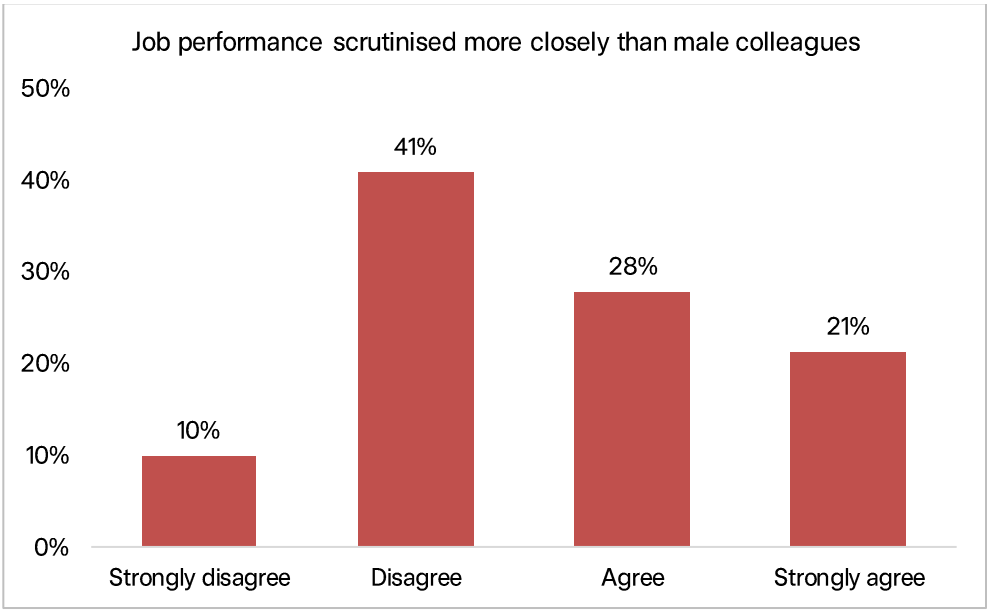
78% of respondents have downplayed their accomplishments when speaking to others.



n = 230

Job performance being scrutinised more closely than male colleagues

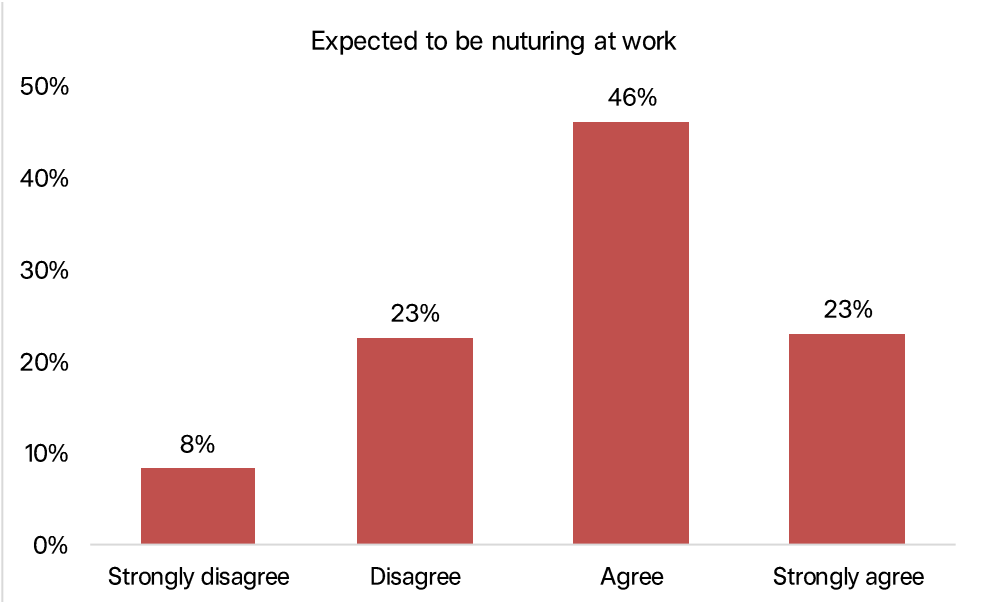
Almost half of the respondents reported that their job performance has been scrutinised more closely than that of their male colleagues.



n = 230

Expected to be nurturing at work

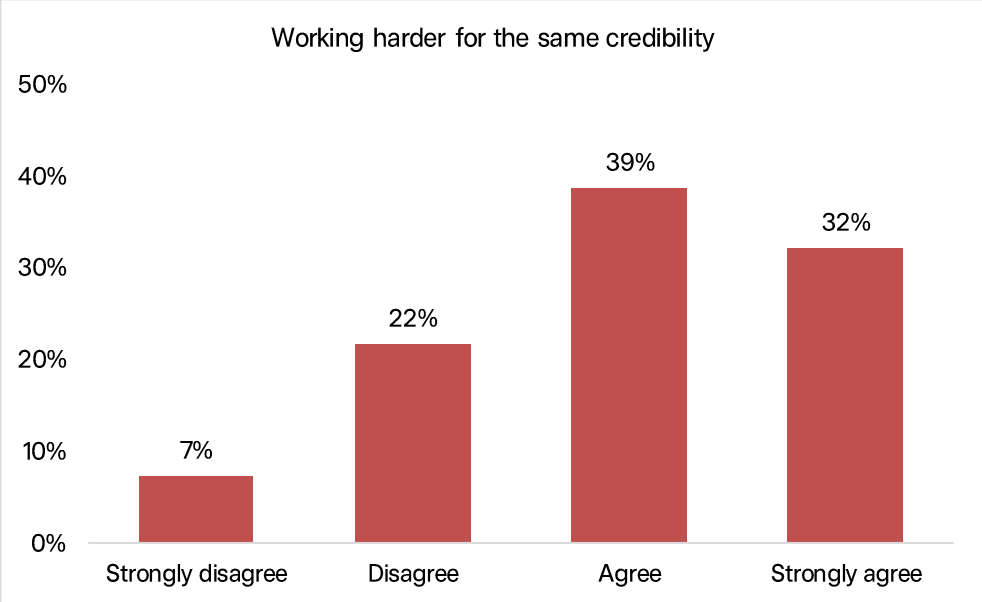
Almost 70% of respondents reported that they were expected to be nurturing in their workplaces.



n = 230

Working harder for the same credibility

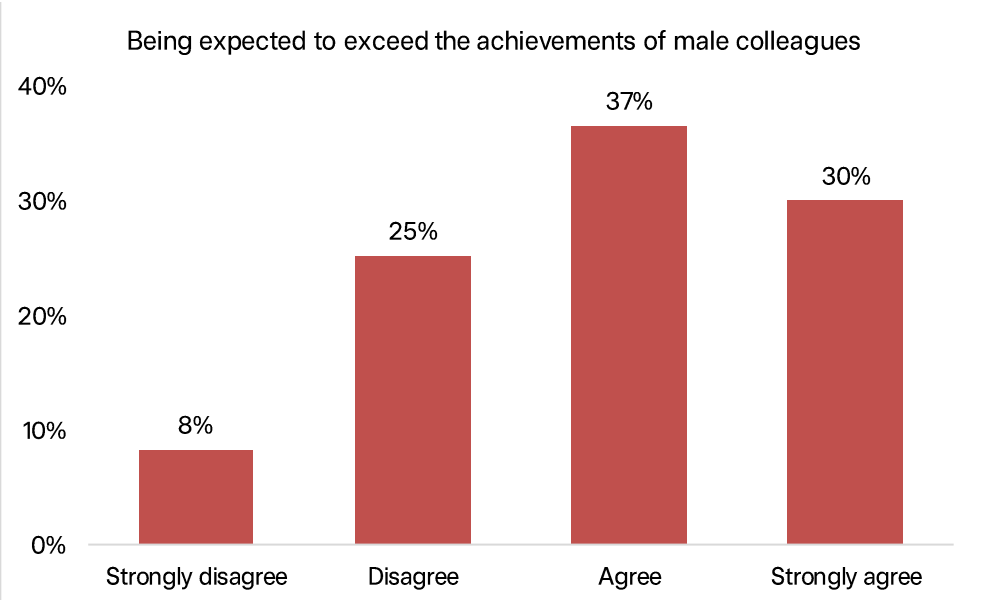
More than 70% of respondents reported that they have to work harder than their male colleagues to get the same credibility.



n = 230

Expected to exceed the achievements of male colleagues

67% of the respondents felt that they were expected to exceed the achievements of their male colleagues.



n = 230

Intersectionality

This section examined how gender is connected to other social identities, including race, age, disability and others in shaping the experience of women and non-binary academics. The respondents were asked to consider their intersectional identities when answering the questions.

More than 90% of respondents have felt unheard and ignored, and their authority was challenged. 86% of them reported that they have been disrespected in the workplace and more than 80% of them have been "put in their place".

83% felt that they had been excluded from networking opportunities, and 87% of them had been assumed not to have much to contribute to the conversation. Their silence tended to be considered as a sign of compliance by others (85%), and they were treated as if they always complied with others' requests (86%).

	Frequently	Often	Rarely	Never
I felt unheard.	19%	38%	36%	7%
My comments have been ignored.	17%	35%	40%	8%
My authority is challenged.	12%	34%	44%	10%
I have been disrespected in the workplace.	13%	27%	45%	14%
Someone has tried to "put me in my place".	14%	26%	41%	19%
I have felt excluded from networking.	22%	32%	29%	17%
People have assumed I did not have much to contribute to the conversation.	9%	31%	47%	13%
Others take my silence as a sign of compliance.	14%	42%	28%	15%
Others treat me as if I will always comply with their requests.	20%	37%	29%	14%

n = 229

Impacts of Gender-based Discrimination

Most of the respondents (83%) believed that there were consequences of gender-based discrimination. Specifically, gender-based discrimination has negative impacts on their employment, career or work (73%), promotion opportunities (67%), and finances (67%). Nearly half of the respondents reported that gender-based discrimination had impacted their relationship with their partner, children, friends or family.

70% of respondents experienced lowered self-esteem and 75% of respondents' confidence had been negatively impacted as a result of gender-based discrimination. This has a considerable impact on the respondents' health (57%), general wellbeing (71%) and mental health (67%).

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
There have been no consequences.	9%	8%	42%	41%
It has negatively impacted my employment, career, or work.	26%	47%	18%	9%
It has negatively impacted promotion opportunities.	27%	40%	25%	8%
It has negative financial consequences for me.	25%	42%	22%	11%
It has negatively impacted my relationships with my partner, children, and family.	15%	33%	36%	15%
It has negatively impacted my self-esteem.	24%	46%	18%	11%
It has negatively impacted my confidence.	27%	48%	15%	9%
It has negatively impacted my health.	19%	38%	31%	11%
It has negatively impacted my general well-being.	25%	46%	19%	10%
It has negatively impacted my mental health.	26%	41%	22%	10%

n = 226

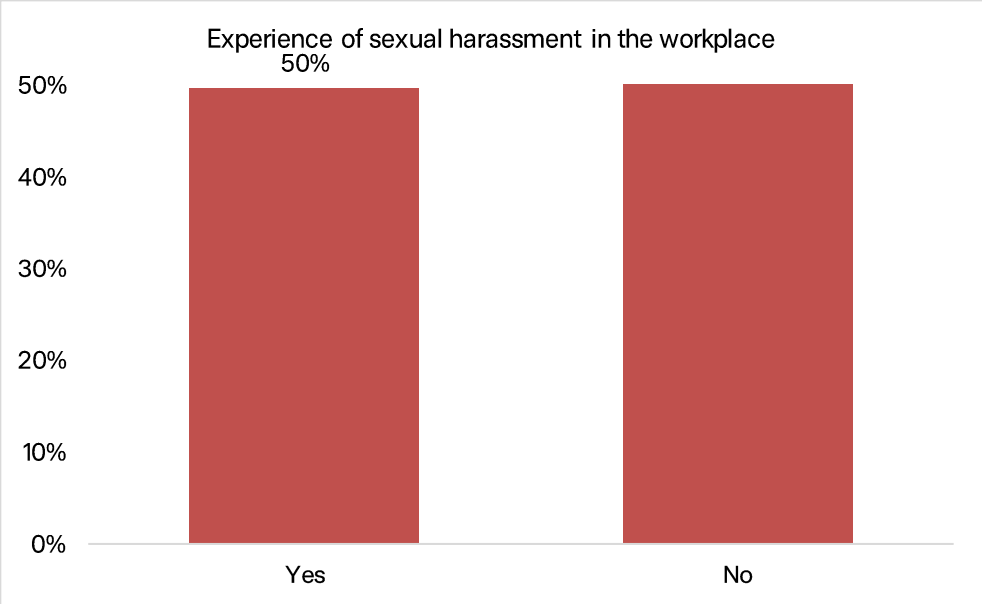
Sexual Harassment

This section examined the presence, prevalence and forms of sexual harassment in Australian universities, Respondents had the option to skip this section, recognising the potentially distressing nature of the questions. Questions covered the following aspects:

- Experiences of sexual harassment.
- Frequency of sexual harassment.
- Who is/are the harasser(s)
- Reporting of sexual harassment.
- Reason for not reporting sexual harassment.

Sexual harassment in Australian universities

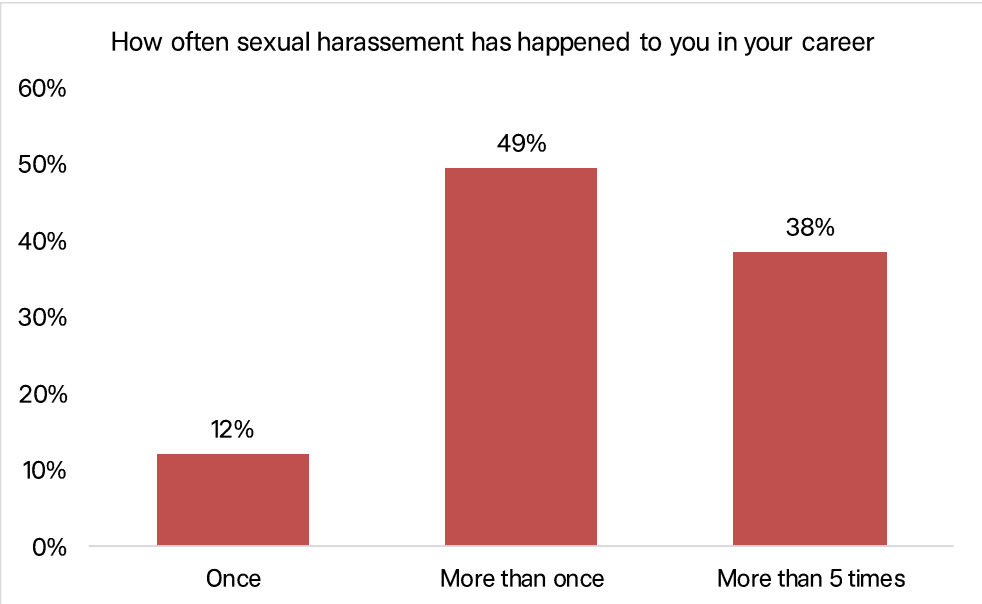
Half of the respondents (n = 91) who answered this question had experienced sexual harassment in their university workplaces. The following data relates to the experiences of these respondents. Some of the following questions allowed respondents to select multiple options. Respondents were also able to skip any question they did not feel comfortable with.



n = 183

Frequency of sexual harassment

49% of respondents have experienced sexual harassment in their workplaces more than once, while 38% have experienced it more than 5 times.



n = 91

Forms of sexual harassment

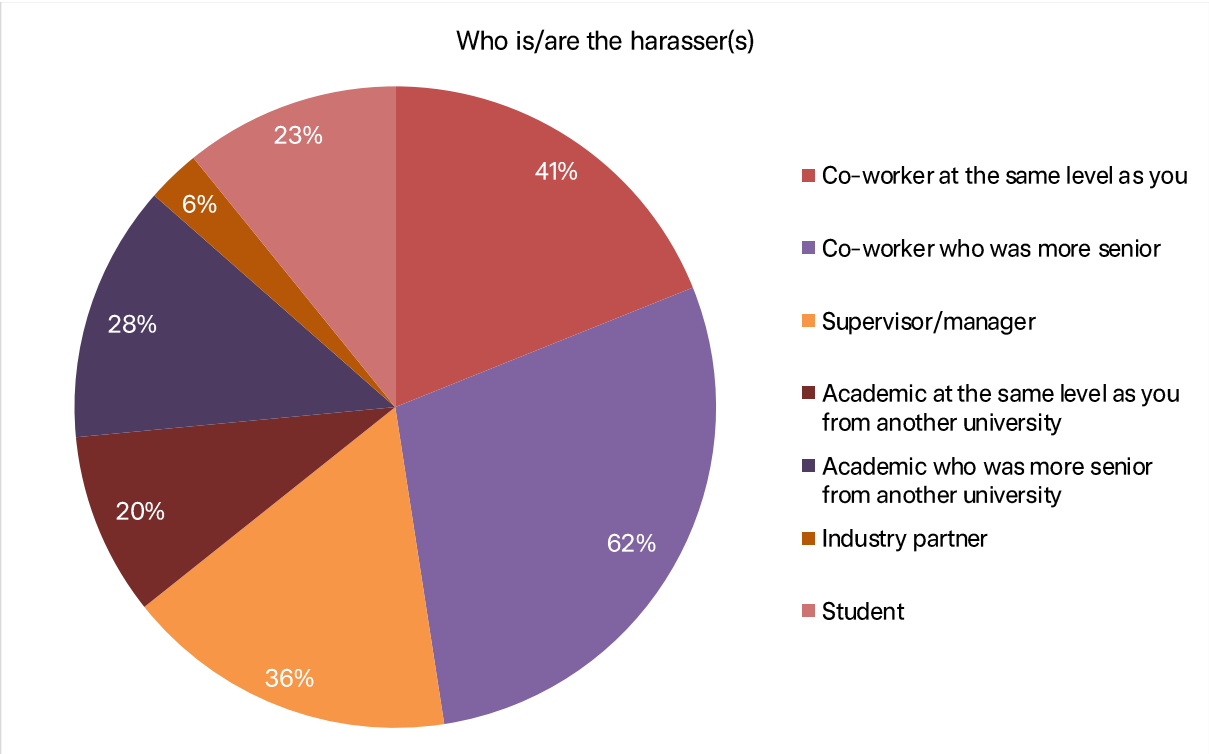
More than 90% of the sexual harassment incidents involved verbal harassment, followed by physical (44%) and written (19%) harassment.

Forms of sexual harassment	%
Verbal	91%
Physical	44%
Written	19%
Others	7%

Note: A respondent could select multiple answers. (n = 91)

The harassers

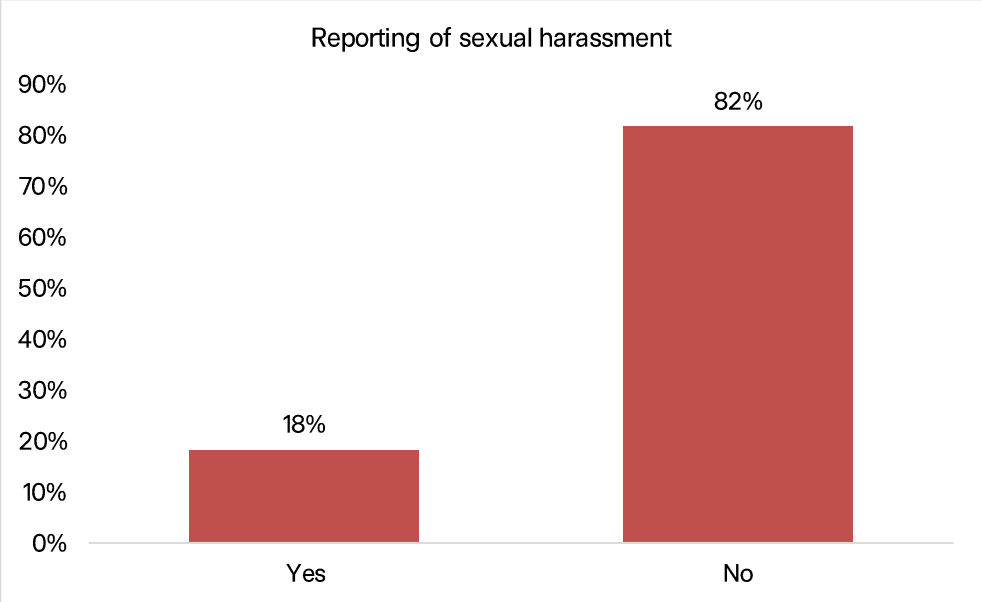
The survey reveals that 85% of the harassers were men, while 11 % were women. Senior co-workers (62%) were the most common harassers, followed by co-workers who were at the same level as the respondents (41%) and their supervisors or managers (36%).



Note: A respondent could select multiple answers. (n = 86)

Reporting of sexual harassment

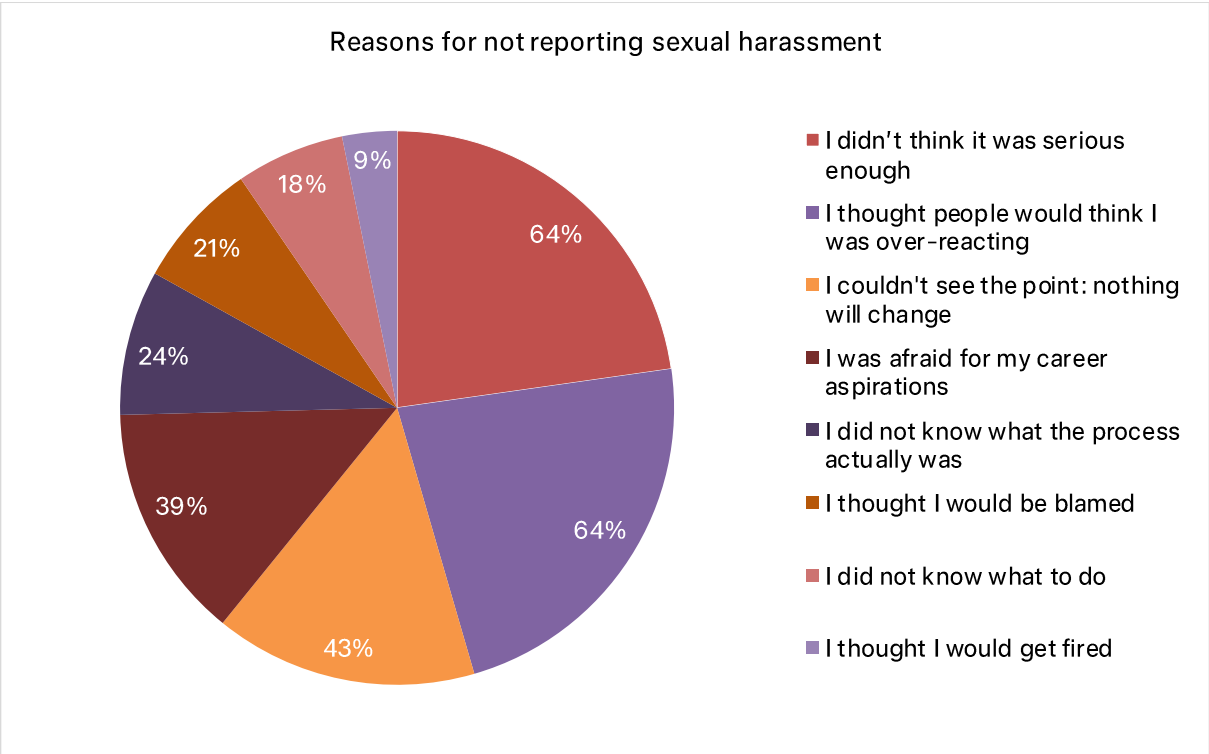
Despite half of the respondents having experienced sexual harassment in their workplaces, less than 20% have reported the incident.



n = 82

Reasons for not reporting

The respondents were reluctant to report sexual harassment because they thought people would think they were overreacting (64%) or that the incidents were not serious enough to be reported (64%). Many also felt that nothing would be changed (43%) or were worried about the impact on their career (39%).



n = 67

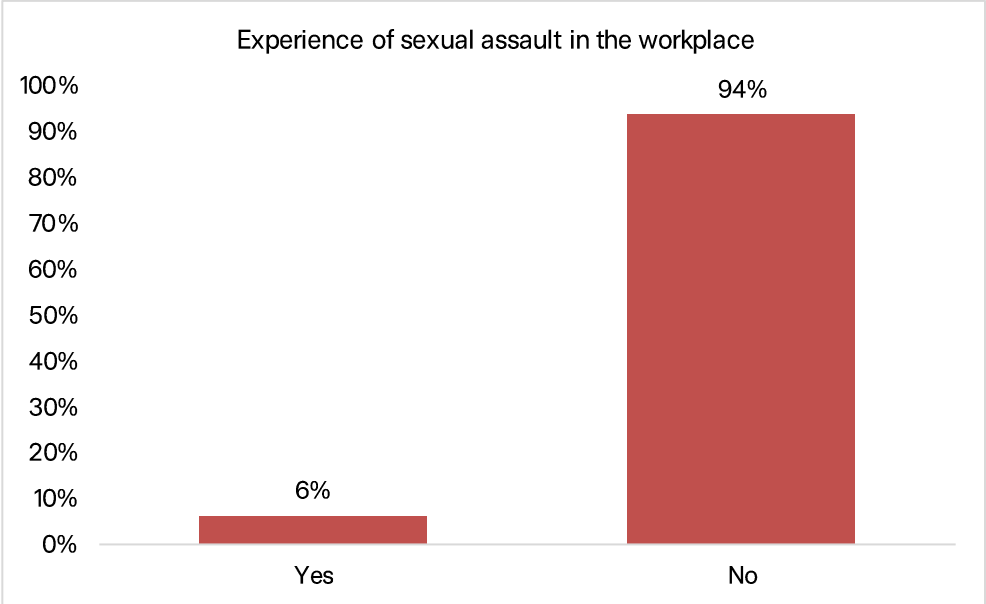
Sexual Assault

This section examined the presence, prevalence and forms of sexual assault in Australian universities, covering the following aspects. Note the respondents were given an option to skip this section.

- Experiences of sexual assault.
- Who is/are the predator(s)?
- Reporting the sexual assault
- Reasons for not reporting the incident.

Sexual assault in Australian universities

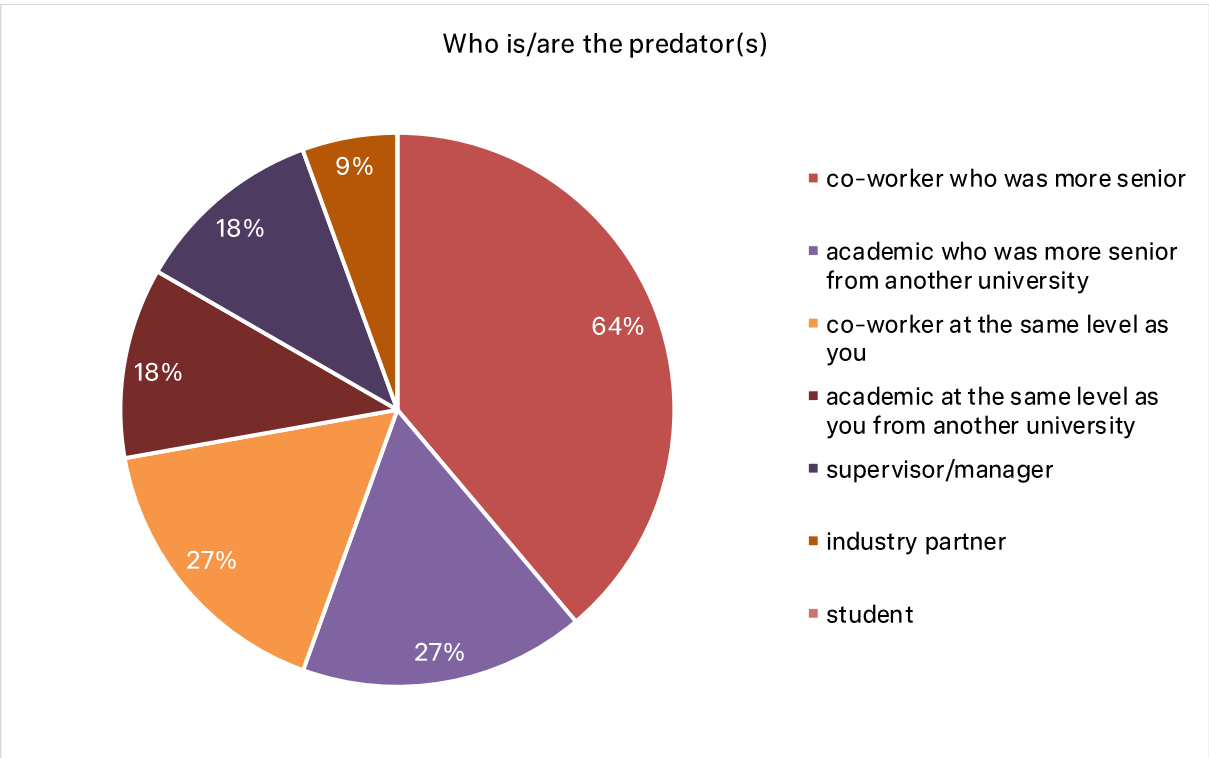
The survey revealed that 11 (6%) respondents had experienced sexual assault in their university workplaces.



n = 176

The predators

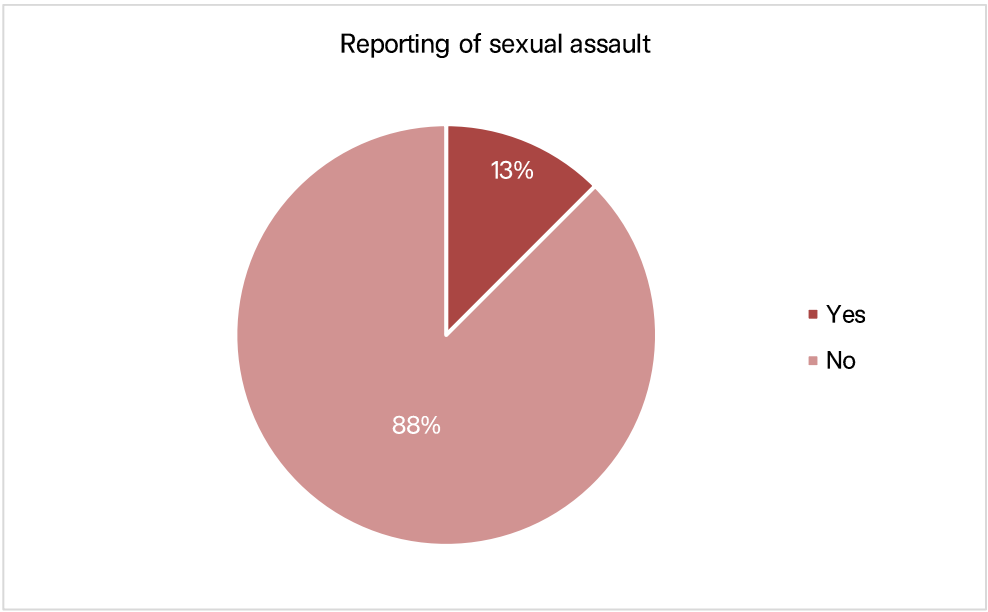
The survey identified that 8 (89%) were assaulted by men while 3 (33%) by women. Some of them were assaulted by both men and women. Senior co-workers were the predators in 64% of the cases. Senior academics from another university and co-workers at the same level as the respondents were the second most common predators, accounting for 27% respectively.



n = 11

Reporting of sexual assault

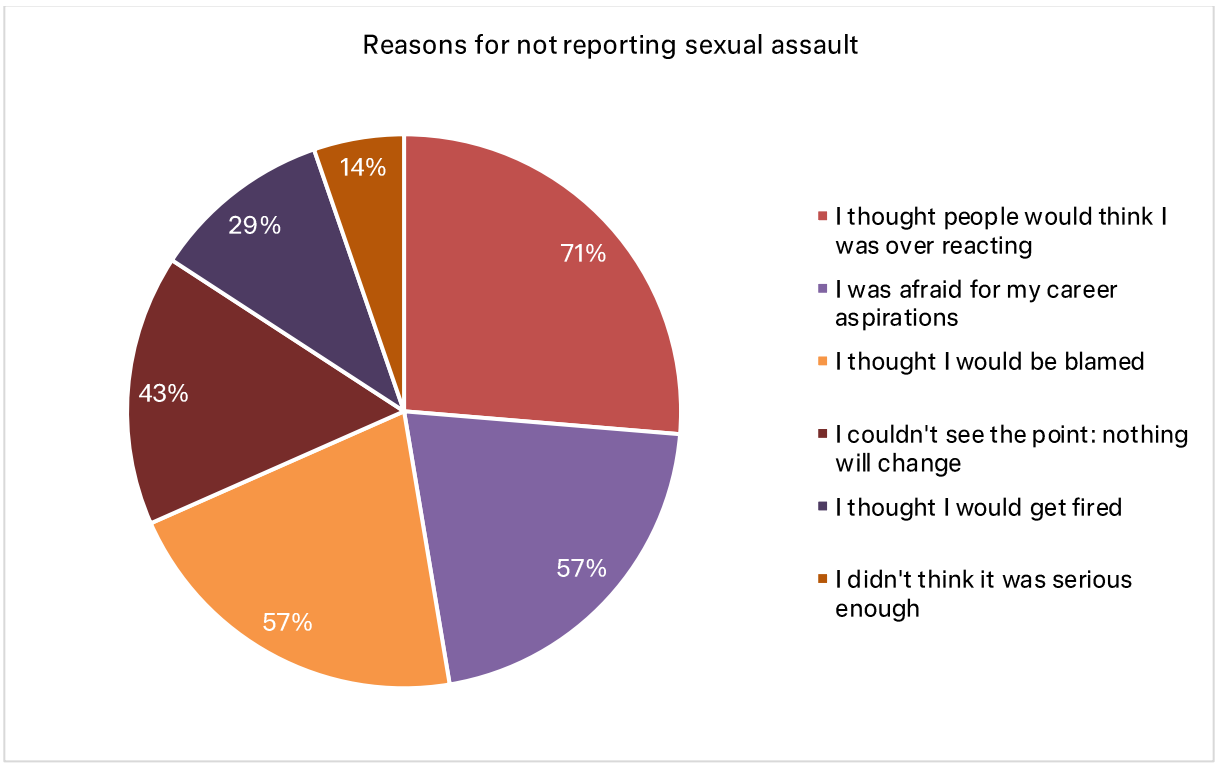
8 out of the 11 respondents who were sexually assaulted answered this question. Only 1 reported the incident.



n = 8

Reasons for not reporting

Most respondents did not report because they thought people would think they were overreacting (71%). They were also afraid for their career aspirations (57%) and thought that they would be blamed for the incident (57%).



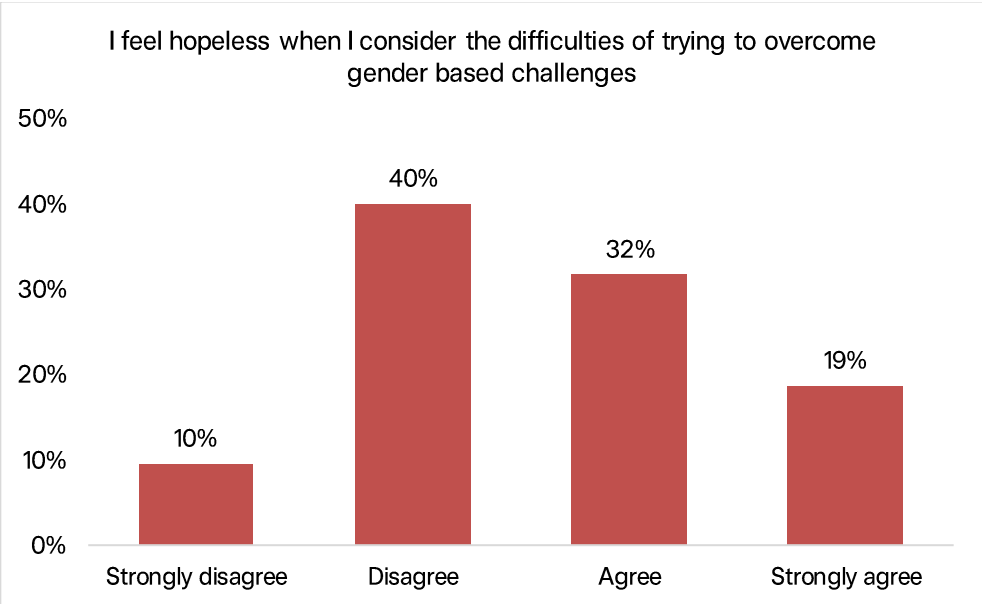
n = 7

Outlook of Overcoming Gender-based Challenges

This section explored the outlook of the respondents regarding whether gender-based challenges can be overcome in their workplaces.

Hopeless about overcoming gender-based challenges

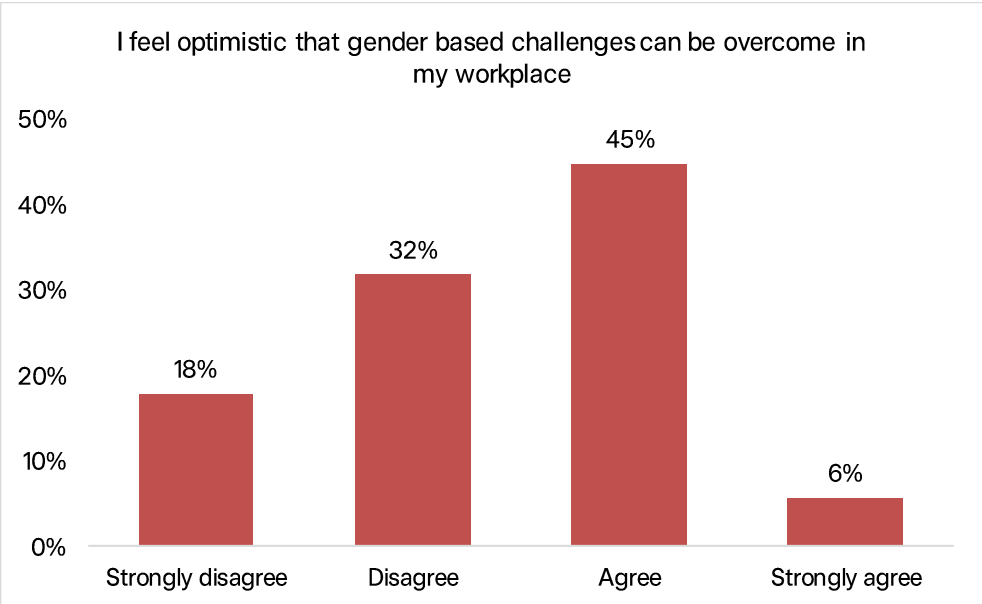
Half of the respondents feel hopeless when they consider the difficulties of trying to overcome gender-based challenges, with 20% strongly agreeing with the pessimistic outlook.



n = 230

Optimistic about overcoming gender-based challenges

By the same token, 51% of the respondents feel optimistic that gender-based challenges can be overcome in their workplace, although only 6% strongly agreed with the optimistic outlook.



n = 230

Voices of Women and Non-binary Academics

This final section includes some of the stories and advice shared by the survey respondents.

"I feel like I'm carrying a lot of things about gender, sexuality, inclusion, equity etc. It's heavy work and tiring. It's also ongoing. The world is a mess with regards to this, it hangs heavy on me. I fight for myself and others."

"I consider myself incredibly lucky to have not experienced any serious sexual harassment or assault within my life. This is a really sad sentence to write, because I know this puts me in the minority. What must it be like to not be in a feminine body and to feel safe all the time."

"Not only are we disadvantaged through systems that are clearly biased against us, but we are not allowed any agency to raise questions about them. Raising questions puts a target on you, gets you labelled as a trouble-maker, and causes a great deal of stress for you without making any changes. So if we want to stay in academia, we have to participate in the system and silently accept our subjugation."

"Never underestimate the importance of surrounding yourself with people who support, respect and appreciate you for who you are, and who actively work to promote an equitable, diverse and inclusive work culture. Only in these environments can you truly grow out of your comfort zone and reach your full potential, and actually enjoy the journey!"

"Silence is a form of acceptance. Whilst choosing not to be silent may feel like the harder choice, it is often the morally right one."

"Hold your space, as uncomfortable as it is, you must hold it."

"Many times you will know that you have been passed on for a promotion because of your ethnicity and gender and it is hard to accept, you feel let down by the system. Just remember you are amazing and you have worked really hard to achieve your qualification and all the amazing work you have done. No one can put you down just hold your head high and remember to keep going and when you get a chance be the helping hand and mentor and role model to other women who need the support that you once needed"

"You are here because you deserve to be here. You have the same rights as every other academic to have a work/life balance, a teaching/research balance and to both nurture and be nurtured. You are not responsible for the behaviour of others, and you are not a gatekeeper for gender equality in the workplace."

"Create a network of supportive and wonderful humans and you just do you - because the change will happen when people are unapologetic about their right to be at the table. And we all have a right to the table. It's not a zero-sum game."

GRIFFITH UNIVERSITY
QUEENSLAND AUSTRALIA

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We would like to extend our deepest gratitude to all our respondents who have trusted us with their experiences and stories.

Other outputs from the project:
Podcast
https://soundcloud.com/user-236146801/epidsode-32how-gender-discrimination-impacts-the-lives-of-academic-women-in-australian-universities

Griffith Enlighten
https://enlighten.griffith.edu.au/everyday-sexism-gender-discrimination-sexual-harassment-in-australian-university-systems/

Follow the project updates at
https://www.griffith.edu.au/research/gender-equality-research-network/research-empowerment