

Gender, sexual harassment, and violence in the hospitality industry

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Cover image: Bar scene (Image credit: Authors)

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Executive Summary

This report shows that gender-based violence, particularly sexual harassment, is a serious and persistent problem in the hospitality sector. Gender-based violence refers to harmful acts directed at an individual based on their gender, and can include sexual, physical, mental and economic harm. It is rooted in gender inequality, the abuse of power and harmful norms (UNHCR 2023). This report draws from a program of empirical research with young hospitality workers to provide evidence of the impacts of gendered harms at work, and provides recommendations regarding required changes in the sector.

While sexual harassment is an entrenched problem in many different workplaces and industries, the gendered dynamics of interactive service labour make the hospitality sector a particularly important site to address gender-based violence. This report centers the voices of young women, queer and non-binary hospitality workers to illustrate how gendered dynamics underpin the problem of gender-based violence in the industry. Women, queer and non-binary workers are central to maintaining hospitality venues as safe and enjoyable spaces for patrons, yet these workers are also most likely to suffer from harms related to gender-based violence. This report highlights the need to better understand and support the young workers in hospitality who are on the front line responding to, and managing, gender-based violence in their venues.

There has been progress in recent years in efforts to address gender-based harms in the sector. For example, since 2021, 60 venues have signed up to a previous union-led “Respect is the Rule” campaign. However, further efforts are needed which address the underlying gendered norms in the industry which can enable discrimination, harassment and violence to flourish. For example, there remains pressure to serve offending customers and for staff to simply ignore gender-based harassment in their workplaces. The findings of this report highlight that gender inequalities underpin not only the attitudes and behaviours leading to violence in these workplaces, but also the manner in which they are frequently responded (Our Watch, 2021). This report provides recommendations drawn from the experiences of young workers in hospitality to suggest changes targeting employers, policy, and resourcing in order to create safe and respectful workplaces for all.

Key Findings

Gender norms related to femininity (such as creating a 'friendly', welcoming and 'fun' atmosphere) are central to the working practices expected from women, queer and non-binary workers.

These same gender norms also informed frequent instances of being sexually harassed at work by customers. Workers whose employers or managers did not have processes for protecting staff meant such issues were individually assessed and navigated by workers on their own.

Women bar workers were often called upon to defuse violent or aggressive patrons at work. Here, gendered associations which position femininity as a caring capacity associated with managing complex interpersonal relations create situations of significant potential harm for workers.

Workers want safe, reliable, decent work where they are respected by their colleagues, managers, employers, and the public.

Key Recommendations

1. New policy for addressing sexual harassment in front-of-house service labour is needed, including processes for registering and resolving complaints, investigations and outcomes and developed in consultation with workers.
2. A 'zero tolerance' approach should be adopted and implemented through hospitality management strategies to account for and act to reduce the risk of sexual and gender-based harassment. Behavioural expectations between workers, and workers and employers, should be discussed and agreed upon.
3. Structural supporting procedures including policy, training and campaigning must be implemented to prevent gender-based discrimination, harassment and violence across Hospitality in accordance with new Respect @ Work Legislation (2022). Preventing workplace harassment and discrimination must be considered part of the context of occupational health of any likely risk to be raised within any given workplace, including hospitality.
4. Hospitality venues must continue to improve gender equity across all staffing positions, to support developing skills and the value of diverse experience in hospitality.
5. Increased funding is needed for local organisations to deliver primary-prevention of gender-based violence training, resources and campaigning tailored for hospitality workers based on their experiences will lead to better outcomes in this industry.

Gender-Based Violence and Sexual Harassment in The Service Industry

There has been increasing public discussion of respect and sexism at work in Australia in recent years, following high profile cases in political and legal workplaces (Hill et al. 2023). Gender-based violence and sexual harassment - such as suggestive, aggressive or degrading comments and unwanted physical contact - is widely documented as a major problem in the interactive service sector (Coffey et al, 2018, 2023; Bruner and Dever 2014; Good and Cooper, 2016; Sharp et al, 2022). Gender-based violence and sexual harassment are symptoms of gender inequality both in the workplace, and in broader society (UNHCR 2023). Sexual harassment in hospitality is prevalent across the globe, affecting 42% of women working in hospitality jobs in the United States, 75% in 27 European countries, 50% in the Nordic Region and 60% in Taiwan (Worke, Koricha & Debelew 2021, p.1). It is also a significant public health issue in Sub-Saharan African hospitality workplaces, such as Accra, Ghana (49.4%), Cameroon (98.8%) and Zimbabwe (78%) (Worke, Koricha & Debelew 2021, p.1). Women historically are over-represented in lower-paid and more demanding roles in the service industry (Guerrier and Adib, 2000; Morgan & Pritchard 2019). In Australia, a recent study which surveyed 4,281 workers during 2020 (HospoVoice, 2021) found that sexual harassment is one of the underlying and ongoing issues within hospitality. Previous surveying by HospoVoice (2017) indicated that 89% of young women working in the industry experienced sexual harassment.

The challenges for women working in hospitality are well-known, and range from a lack of reward and recognition, to serious workplace safety issues including gender-based violence, including sexual harassment (Morgan & Pritchard 2019, p.39). Sexual harassment in front of house hospitality work disproportionately affects younger women, transgender people and tipped workers, who comprise a significant proportion of this workforce (see Gilbert et al., 1998; Poulson, 2007; Hadjisolomou, 2021; Booyens et al. 2022).

The results of the largest national survey into workplace sexual harassment (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2022) highlight that those working in the areas that incorporate hospitality experience higher rates than the national average. Long unsociable hours, a preponderance of young women working on flexible, part-time contracts in often sexualised marketing and working environments, and broader gender norms are shown to be contributing factors (Morgan & Pritchard 2019 p.42).

WorkSafe Victoria (2022) highlights gender-based violence including sexual harassment as an occupation health and safety issue across all workplaces. Their guide for employers to understand and prevent such incidents of violence and harassment includes examples from the hospitality industry, and the instruction of safe work procedures that include violence prevention strategies. These strategies are inclusive of both prevention, response and ongoing management and referral for support in regard to work-related gendered violence. A report from the Restaurants and Catering Authority (R&CA) in 2019 pointed out that while there is a regulatory framework to respond to and support those who experience sexual and harassment, the industry largely identifies a number of 'cultural, psychological, and circumstantial' barriers to engage with these responses, or to prevent such events from occurring (p.1). In 2020 the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission (VEOHRC) identified that increasing job precarity and the COVID-19 pandemic have heightened gender inequalities at work, especially in industries where women take up a greater population such as hospitality and retail. Significant gender inequities here include an \$1.90 per hour wage gap, and that the majority of management positions in the industry are given to men (KPMG, 2022). Such ongoing inequalities have led to uneven approaches to addressing sexual harassment in sectors where it is considered an industry hazard¹ (WorkSafe Australia, 2022; VEOHRC, 2020). Broader planning and targeted approaches to address this issue as a known risk across through cultural and systemic approaches in hospitality are suggested to prevent sexual harassment (VEOHC, 2020).

Feminist analysis and hospitality work

For feminist scholars, gender norms play an important role in understanding how the service industry functions. The hospitality industry is a traditional site of 'feminised labour'; that is, work which is predominantly associated with feminine norms, roles, and expectations, which women are imagined as most able to perform. Along with these feminine norms, women working in front-of-house hospitality jobs are burdened by gendered norms and stereotypes, where their roles as 'servers' position them as sexually and emotionally available to men. Young women are often hired explicitly because they are attractive to men and placed in customer-facing roles for this reason, ultimately disempowering workers and making them vulnerable to sexual harassment.

Femininity, sexuality and harassment in service labour

Rather than concentrating on task-based processes such as taking orders, clearing tables or pouring drinks, social researchers have paid attention to how gender is performed at work. Hochschild's (1983) landmark study of emotional labour showed that workers are encouraged to draw on femininity to create pleasurable consumption experiences. In hospitality labour, appearing bubbly, light-hearted, and joyful are valuable dispositions that have been normalised as 'part of the job', so much so that they are often described as 'skills' in hospitality job advertisements. Service sector employees are encouraged to invest in the quality of a customer's service experience. For women workers, this can also mean performing feminine receptivity towards male customers (Knights and Thanem 2005). Developing a sense of humour, a personable manner, and a positive attitude towards the customer (Guerrier and Adib 2000; Dowling 2012; Wolkowitz 2006) are all ways in which the lines between interactions between male customers and female service staff may become 'blurred' as the processes of this labour mobilise the broader politics of heterosexual desire. Studies have shown that managing unwanted sexual attention and harassment is typically normalised as 'part of the job' particularly in bar work, where monitoring and 'calling out' problematic male customers was a critical and routine part of their work (Green 2021; Coffey 2018).

Feminist research describes how the norms of femininity, including receptivity and heterosexual appeal, can create the conditions for sexual harassment in service labour (Hochschild, 1983; Brunner and Dever, 2014; Pettinger, 2011; Good and Cooper, 2016; Thomas and Kitzinger, 1994; Watts, 2007). Hospitality is a more sexualised space than many other service occupations such as retail (Poulston 2008). The monitoring of styles of dress, appearance and comportment which align with 'fun', light-hearted femininity is also crucial in this sphere of work. These demands have been described as 'aesthetic labour' (Mears 2014), drawing attention to the fashion, body and beauty requirements alongside those of emotional labour. Bodily strategies undertaken in an effort to 'look right' are critical in producing the sensation of 'feeling right' which venues hope to create for consumers (Witz et al. 2003). Value is produced through harnessing normative heterosexual gendered desires. For some trans women for instance, the nature of hospitality work as highly feminised precludes them from full participation in the labour market. Their visibility as trans women, and their lack of access to economic and social resources, can mean that employers are less likely to see value in the kinds of feminine performances that form part of their labour (Irving, 2015).

Similarly, scholarship exploring the experiences of queer, trans and non-binary workers have described using a range of strategies including physical presentation, manner, and personal communication styles to generate a welcoming, pleasurable interaction with a customer (Sharp et al 2022). These workers described negotiating of gender and sexuality norms at work as a complex, and often fraught, experience. They described feeling positioned in a venue promote to diversity, with their presence signalling to consumers that a venue is inclusive and that their patronage demonstrates a tolerance of non-normative sexualities (Gorman-Murray and Nash, 2017). However, workers also felt vulnerable to intolerance or hostility from venue owners, managers, co-workers or customers (Willis, 2009).



Image 1: Bar workers (Image credit: Authors)

Methods and study details

This report draws on qualitative data from a program of research spanning 2017-2022 about employment, labour and identity amongst young (aged 18-30) hospitality workers across two Australian cities, Melbourne and Newcastle. The two research sites are evocative of post-industrial global shifts in the nature of the interactive service economy. Melbourne is a relatively large 'global city' known for the size and heterogeneity of its night-time economy. Melbourne is marketed as Australia's 'cultural capital', a term which captures an array of cultural practices including the substantial underground music scene, urban street-art, and a large range of small or boutique cafes and bars. The hospitality industry in Melbourne is therefore a part of its broader reputation for 'niche' consumption. Newcastle is a large regional city, home to a large coal port and the former home of large steelworks which was a central pillar of the local economy, and which closed in 1999. The local government has emphasised (or at least publicly marketed) the importance of services such as the leisure, tourism and creative industries as part of efforts for urban revitalisation.

The research program consists of three interview-based projects. This report includes data from a small pilot project funded by the University of Newcastle, which interviewed 13 bar workers in Melbourne, Australia in 2017. The second is a larger scale project funded by the Australian Research Council between 2019-2021 conducted with 85 hospitality workers across Melbourne (in the state of Victoria) and Newcastle (in the state of New South Wales) in Australia. The final stage of this project interviewed another 26 participants in Melbourne. Together, these projects have to date interviewed 124 hospitality workers in a range of different bars, restaurants and cafes. We also conducted ethnographic observations of 11 venues and hospitality settings in Melbourne similar in style to those interview participants worked in to gain a sense of the sorts of interactions and working styles required by hospitality staff. We took a series of photographs during these observations, some of which appear in this report.

We used a purposive and snowball sampling techniques to recruit hospitality workers through industry contacts and advertisements via public social media platforms that are used by hospitality workers to exchange information about employment. These include the "Melbourne Bartender's Exchange" and "Newcastle Hospitality Jobs" Facebook pages. Advertisements invited participants to take part in an interview to discuss working practices, working identities and experiences of work in different parts of the hospitality sector.

Participants included 67 women, 51 men², and 6 non-binary or gender-fluid participants who were aged between 18 and 30 years old, and identified their ethnic cultural backgrounds as Asian, Indian, Italian-Australian, Filipino, Vietnamese, Singapore, Chinese, Burmese, Polish-Australian, Sri-Lankan, Bangladeshi, Greek, Lebanese, and 'White Australian'. Participants possessed a range of educational qualifications, from those who had not finished the final year of high school (year 12 in Australia) to those with postgraduate qualifications. These participants worked as bar and wait staff in a range of different types of venues, from large taverns to small 'hip' or 'alternative' bars and cafes in Melbourne and Newcastle city. Some of the women acted as both front of house bar workers and managers. Notably, venues the manager-participants worked at were the smaller, less 'mainstream' venues which presented an aesthetic in contrast to the typical cocktail bar, pub, or 'beer barn' atmosphere to be found in other parts of the city or outer suburbs. This point is relevant in situating the informal systems or processes participants (including managers) relied on when navigating violent or aggressive customers.

Semi-structured interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 2 hours in length. Interviews discussed biographical experiences of work, labouring practices and relationships in different venues and in the sector generally, the relationship between taste, consumption and labour and issues connected with gender and sexuality including sexual harassment. In the last phase of the study, photographs of venues previously discussed in the study were used in the interviews to prompt further understanding of the nature of work under different venue's aesthetic conditions. The transcribed interviews were entered into NVivo 11 and coded, then analysed and developed thematically (Braun and Clarke 2006) during the course of meetings and discussions between the research team. Braun and Clarke (2006, p.81) articulate thematic analysis as an interpretative process concerned with describing and theorising how phenomena are socially produced. Where other research has relied largely on surveys to demonstrate the widespread magnitude of sexual harassment in the industry, the qualitative data from our project adds much-needed depth for understanding the impacts and significance of this issue. We foreground the experiences of women, queer and nonbinary hospitality workers in this report to inform a series of recommendations regarding changes that are required to address this significant issue.

In the sections below, we first discuss how particular forms of femininity are expected from young women, queer and non-binary workers, before discussing examples of sexual harassment, and how workers learn to mitigate the risk of gender-based harm through the course of their work. We then examine how women bar workers are often made responsible for managing aggressive patrons in bars, and how this poses significant risks for young workers.

Femininity norms in hospitality work

Bar workers described that creating a 'buzz' or 'vibe' in a bar was a cornerstone of their work. Being a 'good bartender' was not merely about serving drinks, and indeed participants were sometimes dismissive of the skill required for that aspect of the job (as participant Greg put it, 'a chimp can pour a beer') (Farrugia et al 2017). Instead, being a good bartender was about the capacity to create a feeling of relaxation and enjoyment.

Gender and femininity norms were central in participants' descriptions of their experiences of hospitality work. Catherine described how she managed different tasks on a typical weekend shift in an atmosphere of 'a lot of orders, a lot of people, a lot of noise'. Working at the bar overlooking the dance-floor, she fulfils traditional bar-tasks such as 'thinking ahead to when we will need another bottle of something, and asking the glassy to get another one', alongside 'reading the crowd' and 'purely interacting with customers', and making sure the 'vibey' dance-club atmosphere is maintained:

[I read the crowd for] how much fun I can have with them, definitely. How annoyed they are if they've been waiting for a while. If I can see that they're pretty annoyed I might have a little bit more fun with them, spend a little bit more time sort of getting them happy again, joking around with them... So particularly when it's busy, obviously they're coming from the dancefloor which is heaving and having heaps of fun and you want to make sure when they're standing at the bar they're still having a good time. They're not losing that buzz so to speak... I think it's just - I don't know, I just do it [Catherine, 24 years old, Melbourne bar worker]

Catherine's efforts to 'read the crowd' and interactions between the bodies is a key skill of her work (see Dowling 2012). As Wolkowitz has highlighted, the embodied dimensions of this form of labour can have pleasurable dimensions in 'demonstrating emotional expertise' (Wolkowitz 2006: 77). Two other Melbourne bar workers, Neve and Jack, said 'it's almost like we're psychologists', describing their expertise in reading patrons' behaviour and anticipating their needs.

Participants of all genders in the study described a 'good shift' at work as one in which interactions with customers were pleasurable; workers could feel 'like themselves'; and they felt they contributed a core part of the atmosphere in the bar. The work of anticipating customers' moods and needs in maintaining vibe requires significant skill in sociability, care, and receptivity, however Catherine described it as an implicit thing she 'just does'. This is significant since, as McRobbie argues, 'femininity is produced, repetitively, in the specific circumstances where it is performed as a normative requirement of the job' (McRobbie 2011: 71).

For some participants, anticipating expectations of the customer and what would make them comfortable would elicit a flirtatious engagement through service, although there were clear boundaries for those working in the industry. For Tamara, this line felt contextual, saying:

There's a time and place. I do have a boyfriend, but it's nothing serious. When there's a group of men, you want to make them laugh. You want to have them comfortable with you, so that you can get them another bottle of wine, you can get them more champagne, buy the more expensive stuff. Nothing that goes that weird - nothing making it weird, but just enough that they are comfortable around you, but I wouldn't really say flirty. I'd never be flirty with anyone. (Tamara, 23 years old. Melbourne restaurant worker).

The 'vibes' and appealing atmospheres bars take shape through the bodies of workers and patrons, and through broader gendered and sexualised dynamics. These dynamics include gendered power relationships in which 'looks' and 'behaviour' play an integral role in customer experience in service work such as bar work (Warhurst and Nickson 2009; Mears 2014; Riach and Wilson 2014). The young women in the study described 'how they look' as an important dimension to their work, and something openly discussed by managers and amongst workers (Coffey et al. 2018). Christine, for example, said:

People go to the bar expecting an ideal stereotype. There's a real sense of expectation that the women behind the bar are sexy and fun, flirty, especially in a [hip] bar... I think a lot of the time I unintentionally became a 'manic-pixie-dream-girl' [stereotype] kind of thing because I had pink hair or red hair or blonde hair and a Joy Division t-shirt, and that was like an ember behind the bar and [these characteristics] screamed at people. It was a weird kind of fantasy thing... I found myself a lot of the time enacting that because it actually gets the tips, and that's shit, but you know (Christine, 24 years old, Melbourne bar worker).

Historically, female service workers have been seen as sexually available to male customers (Poulston 2008).



Image 2: Bar scene (Image credit: Authors)

Queer, non-binary and trans workers described how their 'different' appearance in terms of gender presentation meant they were asked to explain their appearance to patrons. For Xan, a non-binary person who worked in a cafe in the Melbourne CBD, their queer sexuality and gender presentation invoked curiosity from the public,

Customers aren't too bad but you get questions. They're like "oh what does that mean?", it be quite exhausting. I find that a lot of people are coming from an inquisitive place and have no intention of harm. But at the same time, it is exhausting because it's me and my life and I'm kind of having to put that out there all the time to make sure that I'm accepted, and people talk to me [laughs] or understand who I am. (Xan, 23 years old. CBD cafe chain)

Trans and non-binary participants in this research recounted similar instances of customers and the broader public inquiring about their gender and sexuality. For some, their visibility as gender non-conforming created anxiety about whether they would be accepted in their role as generating a positive consumption experience. Bianca, a trans woman working as a host in a fine-dining venue in the inner-Northern suburbs of Melbourne explains that,

I think for me as a trans woman, there is kind of a moment of insecurity when I meet someone for the first time and having maybe emailed or spoken to or whatever through text before or sent my resume or whatever and then when I first meet them face-to-face, there's often a moment of anticipation of how they may react because of course, there is a possibility that they may react negatively to finding out or realising that I am trans. (Bianca, 25 years old. Fine-dining restaurant)

The gender constraints of traditional femininity can disadvantage trans women if they are seen as offering less value because their femininity is seen as 'less competent' (Irving, 2015, p: 51). Trans women can struggle to access service employment due to the rigidity of both gender and sexuality norms and the perceived value that it produces within a consumption experience.

Sexual harassment as a frequent occurrence

Sexual harassment in the hospitality sector is a significant problem, and was seen by participants as an unfortunate but unavoidable 'part of the job' for young women. Workers described that harassment could come from customers, managers or employers. For participants in this study, learning to manage that risk was a crucial skill they developed over time. These skills were mostly learned informally through observing co-workers' strategies. Examples of sexual harassment responses being led by the employer or venue management were rare. The sexualized atmosphere of the bar or club were particularly difficult spaces for young women to negotiate.

'The line is clear'

Participants described that the expectation that women working in a bar should be 'sexy, fun and flirty'. Creating a 'fun' environment and interacting with customers are key for creating a social atmosphere of pleasure, relaxation and revelry. Workers described this part of the job as enjoyable, but if there was a sense where customers were not 'playing fair', or 'crossing the line', women workers felt 'powerless' and 'uncomfortable':

"I totally get that the lusty drunk vibe is just a part of working in a bar, and that's cool, that's fine. As long as we're on an equal playing field. But it's when someone says it in a way that makes you feel powerless or uncomfortable in that way that it's like, just fuck off... there just is a line and sometimes people cross it. I think it's very clear. I think it's as soon as you feel unsafe in a situation, it's like 'don't say to me, anything explicit about what you want to do with me'. That's obviously, deeply inappropriate. I'm serving you a drink." (Karen, 25 years old. Melbourne Bar Worker)

The same sexually-charged atmosphere in which flirting is common and often enjoyable can cross over to feeling 'uncomfortable' and 'unsafe'. which requires the situation to be 'read' and managed differently. Karen says the 'line is clear' and drawn at sexually-explicit comments from customers. Such comments are unequivocally examples of sexual harassment, which are experienced as 'deeply inappropriate' and disrespectful. Catherine describes an array of problematic behaviours and 'types' of customer she has encountered in the bar:

"There's...the dudes who are really sleazy, really unpleasant, really aggressive...and they're the ones who are just everywhere, do you know what I mean? These dudes are like 'hahah' and just taking up space and completely unaware of anybody else and then there's the quiet butt grabber and ass grabber, or the leg stroker. You're walking around trying to glass or trying to sweep up through a crowd and as you pass somebody just puts their hand up your skirt and disappears into the crowd. I hated that." (Catherine)

Similar examples of physical assault and verbal sexual harassment are reported in this sector (Kavanaugh 2013; Mellgren et al. 2017). Catherine and Karen described how male customers deliberately take advantage of sexist assumptions about feminine women's receptivity and sexual availability which seem to 'come with the territory' of bar-work. Such instances are mainly through individual self-management tactics of staff (Nicholls 2017).

Meera, in contrast, works in a venue where systems were in place to look after staff and observe customer interactions. This enabled her to feel more comfortable with dealing with unpleasant interactions or harassment.

"I think they've seen things like this before and that's why the security's very tight. They make sure that they're doing the rounds all the time and they're very particular about who they let in. But sometimes obviously weird people do get through and they behave like that. They might not behave like that with certain people, but they might behave like that with the staff, so that's why my general manager was like oh, we've been observing them for some time. Their friends are fine, they're not doing anything weird. But this particular person we were looking at and they kept coming to me asking for your number, so the minute you paged us we knew that was time to kick them out. So I think it was very nice of them to do that. They even made sure that – I was finishing at three o'clock that morning, so they organised an Uber for me to go home." (Meera, 30 years old. Melbourne club worker).

Participants we spoke to who worked in venues with more systemic approaches to interrupting unacceptable behaviour or responding to harassment often felt more confident and relaxed about their workplace. As Meera suggested, there was security knowing whose role this was when you are not the only person expected to mitigate your personal risk of violence and harassment. For those in venues where security is managed by hospitality staff rather than through a third party, the onus on negotiating calling out bad behaviour rests with individual workers.

Ben, a trans man from Newcastle working as a barista, was not in a management position and yearned for management to clearly designate “the line” for what is “acceptable” or “unacceptable” behaviour, rather than placing responsibility on the individual to “speak out”:

“Yeah, where is that line and why is that line not standardised across venues? I feel like that line [calling out bad behaviour] is dictated by your superiors and that sort of intersects with the way that you are expected to comport yourself at whatever venue that you’re working at, and that will change depending on the venue. But yeah I think having to negotiate the way that you are expected to comport yourself and that kind of bullshit bigotry. For us [queer workers] - those two things don’t necessarily intersect in a good place.” (Ben, 30 years old. Newcastle Barista)

Workers were expected to navigate aggressive and uncomfortable situations while also assessing the degree to which they would be supported by management in responding to instances of homophobia and transphobia which queer participants saw as forms of gender-based violence.

For some participants, the threat of sexual violence and harassment came not only from their co-workers but from their employers. For those such as Farhana who experience such harassment in their first roles within the industry, such instances can create a cynical impression of potential employers. Farhana said:

“They had some special soup on the menu, like soup of the day, and I was asking [my boss], “hey, how did you make this soup? Like, teach me”. So when I said, teach me, I meant, like, tell me how you made it, the recipe. He got so over-enthusiastic about, like, seizing that opportunity. He was saying, “oh, you can’t come to my place because I’m married but I can come to your place”, and it had, like – again, it had such a flirty, flirtatious element to it. I mean, he was trying to, I didn’t find it flirty at all. It was, yeah – and then there were other times. I think the last time, before I quit. This is so disgusting [laughs]. We were making sandwiches and he asked me to cut a cucumber and he was, like, “this cucumber is smaller than mine”. (Farhana, 23 years old. Melbourne café worker).

These examples illustrate how sexual harassment at work was understood to be a common occurrence amongst women, queer and non-binary workers in particular. In all of these instances, dynamics of power between the public, colleagues and management and broader gender norms are important for understanding the conditions for sexual harassment hospitality industry.

‘Survival skills’: learning to assess risk

Participants associated particular kinds of hospitality venues with a greater risk of harassment. For example, service of alcohol in loud and crowded venues could be seen as explicitly ‘risky’, whereas working in fine-dining or high-end service may place more pressure to ‘put up’ with the different kinds of harassment and discrimination from patrons. Just as different venues draw different clientele, they also draw different workers who consider such risks and how to prevent them as part of the potential of their role. As Sakchai shared:

“In a bar it might be... people are so drunk they might say things that they don’t normally do. It’s very rare but such harassment might happen. Something that might sound offensive to some of the staff that serve in this particular setting... You have to make sure that you - you have to prevent that.” (Sakchai, 21 years old. Melbourne café worker)

For workers like Sakchai, the responsibility to prevent harassment or discrimination was incorporated into an individual’s choice of venue to work in. Some made the choice not to work in service of alcohol for this reason in particular, or to avoid certain neighbourhoods. Orinda told us that:

“A couple of friends told me that in certain suburbs, where one was working in a bakery, she said this male customer would always often, sometimes hang around outside wanting to then talk to her after she was - during her lunch break and things. I’ve heard a few creepy things like that.” (Orinda, 28 years old. Melbourne café worker)

Others felt the potential for violence or harassment could be found in any venue. These workers highlighted that the inherent risk of service, while currently managed by individuals and some employers or managers, was one of broader cultural and structural elements that enable disrespect and harassment. For example, working in fine dining could bring out a particular type of expectation from customers that Tamara had to push back against:

"This guy came in and he sat down, and he was quite a large guy. Because we put the napkin on his lap, over the night, his napkin had fallen to the floor, and it was right next to his area, like it was on the ground there. He said, can you pick it up for me? I said, no, I'm not picking it up. That's too close to you. I'll get you a new one. I got him a new one, and then that new one also fell on the floor. He said, 'Just go around and go get it. Go around the table and you can bend down and you can get it'. I was like, 'No. I told you; I'm going to get too close to you. It's in a really bad area. I'm not going to get it for you. I'll get you a new one'. He got a bit annoyed." (Tamara, 23 years old. Melbourne restaurant worker).

In this example, Tamara reveals how she draws a line against what the customer was asking of her. Noting that getting "too close" posed a risk to both her and the customer, she used the context of fine-dining protocol to push back, despite his annoyance. Being able to read the situation and knowing how she could both avoid escalating the potential harm and resist compliance with harassment.

Learning how to manage problematic, harassing or abusive customers is considered a normal and required part of the job for many woman bar workers. Jenny echoes other female participants including Catherine and Karen in describing a non-conscious vigilance to the undercurrents of danger and risk in her work, including those interactions with patrons and with co-workers that are enjoyable or fun. Jenny says this embodied capacity to 'scan for risk' comes 'from personal experiences of not being safe in venues and not being safe as a woman in the world sometimes':

I think certainly when women are dealing with these issues there is all this other stuff that they have experienced just from inhabiting a female body as well...You're already used to receiving a certain amount of shit and attention and abuse sometimes as well and harassment.

I think, like, a lot of women will talk about how they can sort of pick a creep immediately, like, if a dude walks into the room. It doesn't matter if it's a venue or if – it could be they're at work or if they're walking home after work and that or something like that. They can tell. There's, like, a – I don't know. It sounds a bit silly but like an innate thing where you're kind of like, I feel uneasy about that person. It's the same deal. So, like, not every single dude that comes into the venue you'd be like, I'm going to keep an eye on that guy but you just get a feeling about people". [Jenny, 30 years old. Melbourne Bar Worker]

These examples connect to broader gendered patterns of harassment that are often dismissed as something that 'just happens' (Thomas and Kitzinger 1994), and that women already manage in the course of their daily lives. The young women described needing to be vigilant in watching others' bodily movements to be alert to cues which could signal a potential threat. In stark contrast, most young men in the study did not discuss issues of harassment in relation to themselves or their colleagues, beyond noting that drunk or aggressive men who were being 'disrespectful' or 'dicks' would be removed by security. Though Finn, a Melbourne Bar worker said he was aware his female colleagues 'have had to deal with it [sexual harassment]', he 'can't recall' anything specific: 'Yeah, there has been some of that [sexual harassment], like, I've heard them say they've dealt with it or told the guy off or something like that for it, it has never escalated to kicking them out, it hasn't got that bad I guess.'

Felicity also described learning how to assess 'body language' and sense 'threats' as an essential skill which 'can't be taught':

"I am able to assess a room and pick out a threat before it becomes a threat. You have to have a gift of the gab in this industry and you've got to have a certain amount of people skills. I can teach anyone to pour a drink, I can't really teach that [ability to assess threats], and that's something that becomes quite apparent with staff, you have either got it or you don't, you have got to be able to talk to people. It's not just verbally, it's body language. If you have got a guy that is about to wind up, you don't go at them with big movements". (Felicity, 29 years old. Newcastle Bar worker)

Developing this capacity to read and respond to customers and potentially risky situations is a complex skill which is essential in bar work. As Zowie said, “It’s important we have enough staff. Another set of eyes, just to have a - to be security guards too. We are security guards as well”. Such skills are cultivated over a long period of time in the job.

Ash, like a number of queer workers, described being particularly attuned to register the potential for violence or harassment in their venue. Ash, a non-binary bar worker, described that their gender expression often rendered them unintelligible to patrons. Yet, at times being misread as a woman could be “beneficial”, providing a “platform” for intervening in situations that may lead to sexual harassment:

I think I tend to use it as a platform to make sure that men are behaving themselves when they’re around the bar. I often do this thing if I notice that there’s a man talking to women at the bar or something I keep a very close eye on him and I’ll make it very blatant that I am staring at this guy for like 30 minutes just watching him. They’ll know because they know women know what weird shit looks like and so they know when a woman’s looking at them that they’re not looking at them for any other reason than I know exactly what you’re fucking doing - step away. (Ash, 22 years old. Melbourne Bar worker)

Participants such as Ash described that being queer gave them a specific disposition, attunement or scope to these relational dynamics which gave them a unique ability to see and intervene in situations. Participants described themselves as particularly attuned to particular workplace tensions which, in their experience, may not be as acutely felt by heterosexual or cisgender workers. These tended to include the possibility of sexual harassment or otherwise problematic gendered relations enacted in bars between customers and bar staff or other customers. Participants suggested that they had an enhanced capacity to recognize and intervene in these because they were queer, which Olivia, a café and bar worker in Melbourne, describes as a “scope” for recognizing and intervening in problematic situations; “Being a person who’s attuned to queer politics, it’s going to be a lot harder on you. Yeah, you’ve got a broader scope.”



Image 3: Safe/Spaces (Image credit: Authors)

Responsibility for managing aggressive patrons

A subset of bar workers (12) who primarily worked in small 'alternative' venues in Melbourne and Newcastle which did not employ security staff described being expected to manage potentially threatening or aggressive patrons themselves. These women bar workers were positioned (by themselves and colleagues) as more capable of defusing potentially violent situations before they escalated. This was due to assumptions connected with normative femininity including expected capacities for particular 'calming' relational styles.

The type of bar venue where women were more likely to be called upon to manage volatile situations were those which were small-scale, 'hip' or 'boutique' venues which presented an aesthetic in contrast the typical cocktail bar, pub, or 'beer barn' atmosphere to be found in other parts of the city or outer suburbs (see Coffey et al. 2018). Such venues were less likely to employ security staff, which meant that workers (many of whom were also acting as managers in these settings) developed their own informal systems or processes for navigating patrons behaving aggressively. This, however, means that the task of managing potentially violent situations falls entirely to bar staff, with women playing a central and taken for granted role.

Felicity worked in a venue that did not employ security staff to maintain a 'fun' atmosphere in the venue:

A big thing here is we don't have security. So when you're coming into the venue you're not being greeted by aggression, you're being greeted by someone who is there to check your ID, make sure you're not intoxicated and is generally smiley and happy.

Felicity associates security guards with an 'aggressive' or imposing presence, creating an atmosphere which is not suited to the 'bohemian' bar she works in. In this environment, it can become taken-for-granted that staff, particularly women, are responsible for maintaining the 'happy atmosphere'.

Finn explained that there is no explicit plan whereby women staff are asked to diffuse aggressive male patrons; it's something which 'just happens':

I think women by nature are seen as less of a threat where if a guy is sort of telling them what to do they'll get aggressive about it. It just happens that way and some people are better at conflict resolution than others as well so there are guys who can be a bit more peaceful in the way they work it out, yeah. (Finn, 26 years old. Melbourne Bar worker)

Finn explains that women are less at risk of violence by these male patrons because they are not seen as a 'threat' to the aggressor. This narrative rests on binary gender norms, where women are positioned outside masculine relations of aggression and competition (Pruitt, 2013; Hobbs et al., 2007).

Stan explained that strategies typically employed by male staff including trying to speak calmly or trying to befriend potentially aggressive patrons would not work with men who were actively looking to start a fight:

Some guys just want to kick off and will start a fight over anything. So, you can try to be their buddy, you can try and get on their side and be concerned and be understanding. But those kind of guys, they can just be like, I'm not your fucking mate, sort of thing, and then, yeah, they'll just boom. It doesn't matter what you do in those situations, you're pretty much fucked. Unless you're a female (staff member), to be honest. Because they're generally not open to punching females – depending on the individual though. (Stan, 22 years old. Newcastle Pub worker)

Another manager, Jenny, recounted examples where she intervened physically by placing her body between aggressive men. Jenny explained that men were typically surprised by her intervention in their behaviour.

"Usually it's men in these situations who are causing the aggro. They do not expect a small woman to be getting in between them and arcing up at them. I think that's what works for me, is that they are surprised by it and that makes them rethink what they're doing. So they don't expect it. They have to reconsider what they're doing immediately because they don't want to hit me and they don't want me to get hurt because then I can charge them with something or then they're, like, the dude that hit a woman in a pub. Like, they don't want to be that guy and there are very few dudes that will not care about that." (Jenny)

Whilst the women bar staff here assumed that male patrons behaving aggressively would be unlikely to hurt them (Coffey et al 2023), this does not align with the literature on prevalence of gender-based violence inflicted on women in all spheres of life, in the home as well as in public settings and workplaces (see Department of Social Services 2022).

Threats and assaults against women bar staff

Despite women bar workers' best efforts to manage and diffuse volatile situations, they also described severe examples of abuse and threats of physical and sexual harm. In one particularly concerning example, Felicity described being followed home, continually harassed, and threatened by a patron she had ejected from the bar:

"I have been spat at, I've been followed home...You will occasionally have guys who are actual pieces of shit. I went to kick one guy out for punching someone. He then proceeded to come back multiple times. He stood out the front and he screamed abuse at me for probably an hour and a half. He consistently came back for six months. I was going to make a police report after he threatened to follow me home and rape me. It's just male entitled yuckiness, but it was coming into my workplace and it was coming to a point where he was trying to get physical with me and then trying to get physical with the other staff when they're trying to step in". (Felicity, 29 years old. Newcastle bar worker)

This example shows that women workers cannot avoid the potential of gender-based violence at work, particularly if they are tasked with the responsibility for acting as security guards as well as creating a 'fun' atmosphere.

The level of violence that occurs in some venues is detailed by Vanessa, where 'Friday night was fight night':

"The idea of security is laughable because that didn't exist when I first started. Friday night was fight night and we didn't get a security guard until I'd worked there for six years. I'd seen people get glassed in the face. Some guy brought a shotgun down and was threatening people. We had a waitress who was held hostage essentially by somebody before I started there but she quit and I think that's why I got a job – yeah". (Vanessa, 25 years old. Newcastle restaurant worker)

These examples show that the task of defusing confrontations and aggressive male patrons can be highly volatile and unpredictable, in keeping with numerous other studies of violence in the night-time economy (Anderson et al., 2007; Fileborn, 2016b; Kavanaugh, 2013; Mellgren et al., 2017). Whilst participants did also describe incidents where women patrons had to be removed, the incidents did not carry the same sense of threat or menace (for example, Felicity described being spat on by a woman, and Candice described a woman standing out the front of the venue yelling abuse).

Others described the importance of relying on security or management in responding to violence and aggression. While Jose said that at his venue there was a "really good security team", there were common occurrences where conflict and harassment driven by customers would escalate towards threats of physical violence and brawls outside of the venue. He said:

"Yeah, had to throw people out for sexually assaulting staff members, for sexually assaulting other patrons, I've been spat at, I've been punched. I've been threatened that people are going to wait around and catch up with me after work, after cutting them off. I've had issues with, especially in kitchens, a lot of chefs that have been quite malicious. Yes, I think for the most part sadly it's very much part and parcel of the trade". (Jose, 21 years old. Melbourne Bartender)

These examples represent an unrecognized form of extra form of gendered labour which women are primarily expected to undertake. Given the scale and breadth of gendered violence against women, in domestic and public spaces including the bars they work, and on the street (Fileborn 2012) the normalized position that women are 'better suited' to manage violence is highly problematic, risky and exploitative for women bar workers.

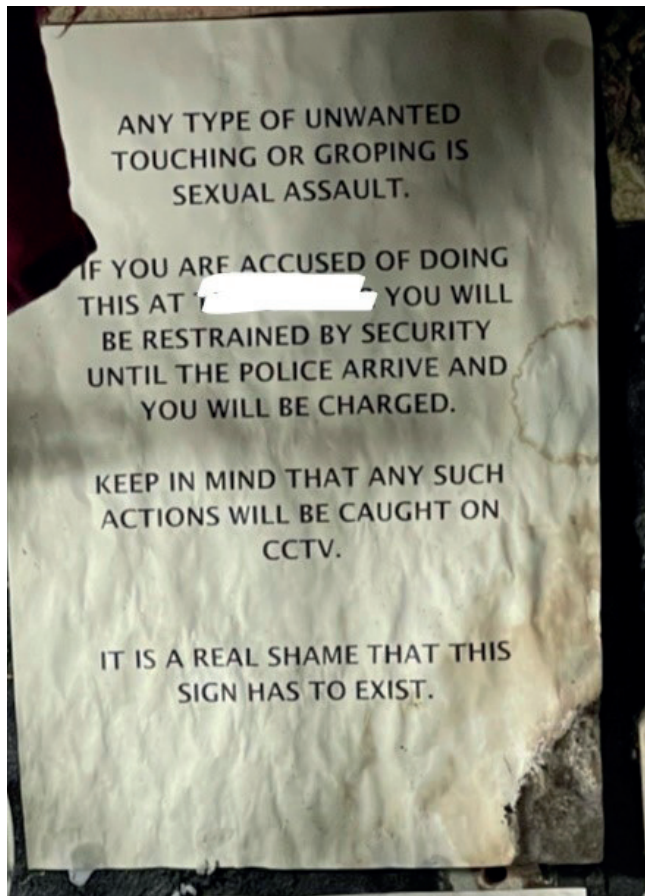


Image 4: Zero tolerance sign in a bar (Image credit: Authors)

Conclusion

In the examples above, we have aimed to show how gender norms are embedded in the working practices and expectations of hospitality staff, which have particular implications for young women who comprise a significant proportion of the industry. Women workers frequently described instances of being sexually harassed at work by customers, and less frequently, by co-workers, managers and employers. Workers whose employers or managers did not have processes for protecting staff meant such issues were individually assessed and navigated by workers on their own. Gender norms directly inform the risk of gender-based violence and harm that women and non-binary workers face. Many young hospitality workers who are women, queer or nonbinary also feel vulnerable to gender-based violence and harassment in an environment where they are often positioned by venues as signaling 'tolerance' and diversity.

In some venues, we found it was common practice for women bar workers to be called upon to defuse violent or aggressive patrons at work. Here, gendered associations which position women as more capable of managing complex interpersonal relations create situations of significant potential harm for workers. The labour of managing violence occurs as part of the demands of feminized caring work in hospitality. These gendered and heterosexual norms (which are dominant in the industry) can make hospitality labour particularly demanding and potentially unsafe for young women, non-binary and trans workers.

While young workers in hospitality are often framed as undertaking 'unskilled labour', our research highlights the value of the experience and understanding that many in the industry utilise to provide safer environments for customers. Workers who took part in this study indicated that they undertake extra tasks to ensure not only their own safety but that of their colleagues, the venue, and the patrons who visit these bars, restaurants, and cafes. However, reporting on sexual and gender-based harassment or complaints, policies remain absent from hospitality industry specific snapshots and data assessments in Australia. Thus, further research into the extent of sexuality and gender-based harassment as well as the labour and skills that young people use to prevent violence in their workplaces can support ongoing change in this industry.

Recommendations for the Industry

1. New policy is needed for addressing sexual harassment in front-of-house service labour, including processes for registering and resolving complaints, investigations and outcomes and developed in consultation with workers. This would align with the Respect @ Work legislation. Such a model, which can be adapted into the context of individual businesses, can lead to a more positive workplace culture and greater retention of skilled workers in hospitality.

Many young workers we spoke to perceive that violence and harassment were ‘just part of the job’ when working in hospitality. This is unacceptable. When businesses take positions of ‘zero tolerance’ that includes a culture of supporting workers, and preventing harassment, these venues are more inclusive for both workers and clientele. Undertaking measures to prevent violence and discrimination in hospitality can thus improve attitudes about venues, as well as broader attitudes about hospitality work itself. This recommendation corresponds with those from workers in adjacent industries such as entertainment and music where zero-harm approaches are argued to best support positive workplace environments, as judged by all who engage in the space (Support Act, 2023).

2. A ‘zero tolerance’ approach should be adopted and implemented. Hospitality management strategies must account for and act to reduce the risk of sexual and gender-based harassment. As this report indicates, hospitality venues differ across scale, style, patronage, offerings, staff turnover, hours of operation and location. As such, management strategies must be adaptable and responsive to venues and the gendered experiences of workers. Good leadership can influence cultural shifts and recognise the value that young hospitality workers bring, including the negotiation of gender and harassment, before harm occurs. Collaboration between management and workers on strategies that minimise risk and reduce harm in the context of their work are essential. It should be explicitly stated and agreed that young workers are not ever expected, or required to, manage volatile or dangerous patrons themselves. Instead, concrete processes led by management in consultation with staff should be in place to ensure managing violence is not ‘part of the job’ for front of house staff. For some workers, perceiving an extra risk of violence or harassment can change their decision about where to work.

Recommendations for Structural and Cultural Change

1. Structural supporting procedures including policy, training and campaigning must be implemented to prevent gender-based discrimination, harassment and violence across Hospitality in accordance with new Respect @ Work Legislation (2022). All employers have a positive duty under new Respect @ Work legislation (2022), to act and prevent workplace sexual harassment. Respect @ Work recommends new frameworks for organisations to prevent and respond to sexual harassment incorporating leadership, risk assessment, culture, support, reporting and measuring which can be tailored to industry. The Respect @ Work framework builds upon the Sex Discrimination Act 1984, the Racial Discrimination Act 1975, and the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 whereby it is unlawful for workers to be discriminated based on gender, race, or ability. The positive duty to prevent harm in the workplace puts the onus on the employer or business owner to be held responsible in cases where discrimination, bullying, racial or religious vilification, victimisation, and sexual harassment occurs. Such laws have been in effect in Victorian workplaces since 2010, intending to address systemic issues through action in business policy, training opportunities, improvement of workplace culture, development of inclusive leadership style, and modelling appropriate workplace behaviour to identify inappropriate behaviour (Victorian Equal Opportunity & Human Rights Commission (VEOHRC), 2010). Preventing workplace harassment and discrimination then, must be considered part of the context of occupational health of any likely risk to be raised within any given workplace, including hospitality.

2. Hospitality venues must continue to improve gender equity across all staffing positions, to support developing skills and the value of diverse experience in hospitality. The findings of this report highlight how frequently the risk for gender and sexual harassment is navigated by young workers, and the manner in which individuals find this risk places them in more precarious work due to a lack of support. If hospitality businesses and industry stakeholders do not follow the demands of their staff, or indeed the changes undertaken by their suppliers and those engaged in other sectors, they risk further devaluing their workforce. Further, these findings indicate that, immediate implementation of trauma-informed, strengths-based industry-specific training and mechanisms for reporting³ must be resourced for cultural change within hospitality to prevent what is otherwise considered an 'everyday practice'.

3. Increased funding to local organisations to deliver primary-prevention of gender-based violence training, resources and campaigning tailored for hospitality workers based on their experiences will lead to better outcomes in this industry. Previous worker-led campaigning to promote respect and safety in hospitality, including against sexual harassment have shown some success. However, these worker-led interventions to prevent violence and increase confidence in bystander action have been obstructed by the limitations of grass-roots organising, and lack of resourcing or adequate funding. Without broader structural support that indicates industry specific incentives for the hospitality industry, such campaigns have been constrained in their ability to change broader attitudes about those working in hospitality, which are connected with wider issues with gender, sexuality, racialisation, and class.

³Nationally, there is low recognition across industries for the usefulness of formal complaint or reporting mechanisms, with less than half of such processes leading to investigation or consequence and change. In only 28% of such cases did those who made such reports feel that the harassment stopped (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2022).

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