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# Gendered disrespect and inequality in retail work: A summary of findings

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**Gender Equality in Working Life  
Research Initiative**



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**SYDNEY**





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Australian  
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# Gendered disrespect and inequality in retail work

## A summary of findings

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Gender Equality in Working Life Research Initiative

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## About this report

This report is the second of two reports summarising preliminary findings of a research project which aims to investigate how retail workers understand and experience the changing nature of work in their sector, and their hopes and fears for the future.

This report contains insights developed through analysis of in-depth interviews with 30 senior stakeholders in the retail industry conducted between October 2020 – April 2021. Insights from these interviews, along with understanding of the extant research, informed the design of a survey of retail workers. This survey was administered between September – October 2021, yielding 1,160 responses. Findings from these first two phases of our study will be used to inform the next phase of our research which includes focus groups with employees about their work and ideas of how to improve it.

## Executive Summary

Retail is Australia's second largest employing industry (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022), with approximately 10% of the Australian labour force working in the sector (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2022a). The retail industry is characterised by a young, diverse workforce (Australian Human Rights Commission., 2019; Baird et al., 2018), most of which is employed on part-time or casual contracts (Australian Human Rights Commission., 2019). Fifty-seven percent (57%) of retail workers are women (Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA), 2021), making retail the third most feminised industry in Australia (ABS, 2020). Women are also fundamental to the success and profitability of businesses in the industry, as they make up approximately 75% of consumer spending decisions (WGEA, 2021) (see Figure 1). Yet, within the retail sector, there is clear evidence of gendered disrespect and inequality. Women are underrepresented in senior leadership roles within retail, holding only 27% of board positions and 17% of chief executive officer roles (WGEA, 2021). Women working in retail – who are predominately young, low paid, and insecurely employed (ABS, 2020; Australian Human Rights Commission., 2019) – experience disproportionate rates of incivility, abusive behaviour, harassment and violence (Australian Human Rights Commission., 2019; Korczynski & Evans, 2013; Tindell & Padavic, 2022).

This report is the second of two reports that interrogate the ways in which women and men working in Australia's retail industry understand and experience the changing nature of work in retail, and their hopes and fears for the future of the industry. In the first report, *Technology and skills in the future of retail work: Summary of findings*, we investigated worker experiences and perceptions of intersecting technological transformations occurring in the Australian retail industry and the changing skills sets required for the future of retail work.

In this report, we examine retail workers' experiences and perceptions of gendered disrespect and inequality. The findings summarised here are based on data collected in interviews with 30 senior industry leaders and stakeholders, including representatives from industry associations and unions, senior managers of major retail employers, retail consultants and other industry experts. It also draws upon the findings of a survey (n = 1,160) of Australian retail, fast food, and warehouse workers.\*

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\* Hereafter referred to simply as retail worker.

Figure 1: Snapshot of retail industry statistics<sup>†</sup>



### Key findings from stakeholder interviews:

In the first section of this report, we explore retail as a feminised industry and how retail work is valued, leadership and career progression within the retail industry, and experiences and perceptions of respect at work.

- Retail work was generally recognised as low skilled, low paid, and highly casualised, all characteristics of a **highly feminised workforce**, and the skills and capabilities exercised by retail workers were regarded as largely **undervalued**.
- **Horizontal gender segregation** was widely present in the retail industry, with women overrepresented in customer-facing interactive service work and men overrepresented in non-customer facing roles. Such segregation was viewed as limiting women’s ability to acquire the skills necessary for **career development and progression**.
- **Vertical gender segregation** was also recognised as a persistent problem, with men overrepresented in **senior leadership positions** in retail. A lack of career development opportunities,

<sup>†</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). (2022, September 14). *Labour Account Australia*. ABS. Retrieved 20 September, 2022. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/labour-accounts/labour-account-australia/latest-release>; Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA). (2021). *Data Explorer – Retail Trade*. WGEA. <https://data.wgea.gov.au/industries/76>; Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). (2022, June 16). *Labour Force*. ABS. Retrieved July 29, 2022. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/employment-and-unemployment/labour-force-australia/may-2022#:~:text=Seasonally%20adjusted%20estimates%20for%20May,employment%20increased%20to%2013%2C510%2C900>; National Skills Commission. (2021, November). *Employment outlook Industry and occupation trends over the five years to November 2026*. National Skills Commission. <https://www.nationalskillscommission.gov.au/topics/employment-projections#Projectionsbyindustry>; Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA). (2021). *Data Explorer – Workforce composition*. WGEA. [https://data.wgea.gov.au/industries/76#gender\\_comp\\_content](https://data.wgea.gov.au/industries/76#gender_comp_content)

and long working hours were seen as key factors limiting women's progression into senior leadership.

- **Abuse and disrespect in retail was found to be gendered in nature**, with young female retail workers often targets of **sexual harassment**. Senior male managers were perceived as common perpetrators of harassment in retail workplaces as were customers in retail stores. Inadequate training, and a lack of support from senior leaders and boards were viewed as barriers to addressing these behaviours.
- The customer-retail worker relationship was fraught with power imbalances, as evidenced by ongoing **customer-perpetrated abuse and sexual harassment** in the industry, a phenomenon which worsened during to the COVID-19 pandemic. Stakeholders commented on how customer abuse and harassment has been overlooked by management, prompting a need for more well-defined procedures and better support from employers.

### Key findings from a survey of retail workers:

- Gender differences were evident when investigating voice at work and equal access to career opportunities. Compared to men, women were less likely to perceive that their **voice is heard in relation to important matters at work** and that they have **equal access to leadership roles, pay rises and promotions**. Of note, retail workers in permanent employment were more likely to agree or strongly agree that their **voice is heard in relation to important matters at work**. Conversely, precarious workers were less likely to feel that their **voice was heard**.
- Gender and intersectional inequalities were identified in retail workers' perspective on equal treatment in the industry. Women and casual retail workers were more likely to perceive that women and men **were not treated equally in the workplace** and that **issues of discrimination were not being appropriately addressed**. Retail workers from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds were more likely to agree that there is **inequality in the workplace**, compared to those who only spoke English at home.
- Gender and employment status influenced worker perceptions of the existence of customer abuse and sexual harassment and how adequately they felt it was being addressed in their workplaces. Women and frontline retail workers were more likely to agree or strongly agree that **customer abuse was a problem in the retail industry** and less likely to perceive that customer **abuse has been adequately addressed**. Women were also less likely to perceive that customers treat women and men equally.
- Our survey indicated that **1 in 5 retail workers have been sexually harassed at work in the past five years**, with **someone more senior** identified as the most common perpetrator of this harassment, closely followed by customers. While women and men similarly acknowledged that **sexual harassment was a problem in the retail industry**, women were less likely to agree or strongly agree that **sexual harassment has been addressed adequately**. Casually employed retail workers were also less likely to agree or strongly agree that **sexual harassment has been addressed adequately**.

# Interviews with Retail Industry Stakeholders

The following section presents analysis of interviews with senior stakeholders from across the retail industry to better understand gendered disrespect and inequality in the retail industry. Senior retail stakeholders expressed concern about the treatment of retail workers and general inequality within the industry, with *“employers not getting it right.”* (Leader, Industry Association). These issues are explored in further detail here including: the undervaluation of retail work, the barriers to women’s career progression in this highly feminised industry, and respect at work.

## Undervaluation of retail work

A common theme that emerged in our stakeholder interviews was the undervaluation of retail work, characterised by high levels of worker precarity, low pay, low status, and low respect. These factors were widely seen to be driven, in part, by retail’s status as a feminised industry, with several stakeholders remarking on the *“historical undervaluation of women’s work”* (Leader, Industry Association). One interviewee who provided consulting services to retail and other feminised industries, spoke about the way workers in feminised sectors were more likely to experience lower rates of pay, lower levels of respect, and higher rates of casualisation:

*“It’s true of all the sectors that we engage with that are poorly paid, highly casualised, not respected, [they] are all largely female dominant, and it drives me insane.”* (Retail Consultant)

Interviewees spoke to the undervaluation of retail skills and capabilities being reflected in the award and other regulation (Whitehouse & Smith, 2020). Stakeholders explicitly noted that the complexity of retail work, which demands a range of technical and emotional skills and competencies from workers, are not reflected in existing industrial instruments. Union leaders identified this as a particular challenge for the industry and regulators, to adequately recognise and appropriately reward the full range of skills required in retail work, as shown in the following two quotes:

*“I think the challenge is that we need to make sure the skills are recognised... it’s [seen as] kind of like you just stand there and sell stuff. It fails in the old industrial sense to recognise the actual work that does get performed.”* (Union Leader)

*“We’ve got these multiskilled, broadly skilled workers who are able to do a whole range of things in these workplaces... in many workplaces, [the skillset required] is much more complex, and we think that the current award structure does not provide for that at all.”* (Union Leader)

## Leadership and career progression

Interviewees identified gender segregation as a key contributor to gendered inequality in retail. Within the industry, women are overrepresented in customer-facing, interactive, service work, while men are proportionally more likely to be employed in non-customer-facing, technical roles, such as product design, logistics, warehousing, and distribution. Men were also viewed as being relatively over-represented in management roles, as noted by one union leader:

*“When you look across the business at the gender breakdown of department managers, assistant managers and store managers, for example, a much higher proportion are male.”* (Union Leader)

Another stakeholder commented on the tendency for some retail employers to *“pigeonhole”* (Union Leader) women into customer-facing roles, based on a stereotypical belief that women are more emotionally adept at managing the needs of customers. Consequently, many women in retail find themselves unable to acquire the skills and experience required to progress into more senior roles and find themselves stuck in lower paid, lower status jobs.

The lack of clearly defined talent development *“pipeline”* (Leader, Home, Work, and Lifestyle Retail Employer) was identified as another factor limiting the progression of women into senior leadership roles.



Some stakeholders noted that most leadership teams in the retail sector were recruited externally, rather than being nurtured and promoted internally. Consequently, the feminised customer-facing workforce was not being developed as potential leadership, as shown in the following quote:

*“The majority of leadership teams are men within retail, and they’re not employed from the shop floor, and they aren’t grown [from within]. They apply for these roles, and they become part of a leadership team.” (Leader, Industry Association)*

Some stakeholders noted that career development and leadership training opportunities in retail were primarily focused on ‘head office’ roles, with less investment in such opportunities within stores. Others argued that, in addition to developing talent internally by building the leadership capabilities and competencies of customer-facing and non-customer-facing workers, the industry needed to ensure that men and women at every stage of the career cycle were being prioritised for career development and training, as shown here:

*“If you don’t develop your internal talent pipeline and have it at a 50/50, you’re not going to see progression.” (Leader, Home, Work, and Lifestyle Retail Employer).*

Targeted career development programs for women, particularly aimed at younger women, were seen as crucial to progress female talent in the retail industry. When properly designed and implemented, such programs have been shown to help women advance within organisations (Babic & Hansez, 2021). One interviewee suggested that the retail industry could improve by providing effective mentoring and sponsorship of women:

*“The key factor here is the transition from one role into a leadership position and how important it is at that time to ensure that there is fulfilling mentorship and support. And I don’t think that we as an industry do that particularly well when it comes to women.” (Leader, Industry Association).*

Working hours were another factor identified as limiting women’s ability to progress into leadership roles within the retail industry. Management positions were seen as characterised as “more than full-time” (Union Leader), with a standard roster of 45 hours per week or more. For anyone with responsibilities outside the workplace, working in management becomes “even more difficult” (Union Leader), causing women to resign, or reduce their working hours. Other interviewees spoke to the difficulties many women faced progressing their careers whilst raising families:

*“We don’t often see companies accept people to be able to have those roles on less than full-time. We know that a lot of women, after they have a family, for a period of time, don’t go back to full-time work. If you have a policy, basically, that says these roles have to be done on a full-time basis, you’re automatically indirectly discriminating women, because we know that there will be a lot of women who will not be able to do that. The way they set that structure up discriminates against women.” (Union Leader)*

Stakeholders viewed leadership roles as they were currently constructed as being incompatible with caring responsibilities, highlighting the need to interrogate the way in which retail jobs are structured, as well as the workloads required.

## Respect at work

Stakeholders told us that gendered disrespect was a major issue in the retail sector, characterised by general incivility toward retail workers, and high levels of gender-based harassment and abuse. Such behaviours were seen to be driven, in part, by retail workers' relatively low status and high levels of precarity. Societal expectations around service work, such as the view that the 'customer is always right', created power imbalances that rendered retail workers particularly vulnerable to such behaviours.

In 2019, a survey of retail union members found that sexual harassment is commonplace in the industry, with almost half (46%) of all women retail workers indicating that they had experienced sexual harassment at work in the past five years (Australian Human Rights Commission., 2019). Interviewees echoed these findings, identifying gender-based harassment, abuse, and general incivility toward retail workers as major problems facing the majority female retail workforce. Stakeholders generally agreed that gender-based harassment – harassment targeted at workers because of their sex or gender – remains a major issue in the retail industry. Such behaviours were described by stakeholders as being disturbingly *“sexual in nature”* and occurring at *“really high levels”* (Union Leader). Younger women were seen as particularly vulnerable, with one interviewee who stated:

*“If you're a young female worker in particular, you're more likely to be sexually harassed than not, at work.” (Union Leader).*

Some stakeholders noted that the gender-stratified nature of the retail industry – with men predominantly in management roles and women predominantly in lower paid, lower status sales roles – exacerbated the vulnerability of women working in the sector. Stakeholders described the way in which some senior male managers would wield their power over their mostly female sales workers, for example:

*“It unnerves me to say this but often you get senior male, middle-aged men, you can see them get their jollies when they walk down to the cosmetic floor and see the women on the floor. So, it's very conservative, stereotypical – things have to change.” (Leader, Industry Association)*

The prevalence of sexual harassment was seen as another factor limiting the career progression of women in retail, with one interviewee commenting that sexual harassment perpetrated by male, senior co-workers is likely to *“prevent women from being able to get into higher positions”* (Union Leader), not only due to lack of promotion but diminishing a worker's desire to move upwards in their organisation.

Interviewees observed several barriers to addressing sexual harassment in retail workplaces. Stakeholders expressed concern that sexual harassment is perceived by senior leadership and boards in the sector as *“a risk that has to be managed”* (Leader, Industry Association) rather than as a workplace health and safety issue for staff. Union interviewees were sceptical of what they saw as the minimum level of compliance with the law. For example:

*“Very few managers, deal with harassment and abuse from offenders appropriately. Some of them might remove the person from the situation but will go on to enable that kind of harassment.” (Union Leader)*

Other interviewees cited a lack of adequate training in how to address and prevent gendered abuse and harassment in retail workplaces. Overall, stakeholders spoke of the general level of awareness of such behaviours in the industry yet an area where *“we need to do more to address”* (Leader, Retail Management and Logistics).

In the service relationship, the customer exerts a special symbolic and functional influence (Good & Cooper, 2016), whereby they are encouraged to see themselves as being in control of the service interaction due to financial power (Korczynski & Ott, 2004). This phenomenon is what scholars have referred to as 'customer sovereignty', depicted by the common service-sector work assumption that 'the customer is always right' (Korczynski & Evans, 2013; Korczynski & Ott, 2004). The freedom afforded to customers to harass service workers, particularly women, is exacerbated by the expectation to perform emotional labour to keep customers satisfied (Chamberlain & Hodson, 2010). Consequently, customers are accorded some authority over workers' jobs, creating power imbalances that give rise to situations

of customer abuse (Hershcovis & Barling, 2010). Similarly, our interviewees noted that certain behaviours are “*expected*” of women working in the industry, placing them in a position of vulnerability vis-a-vis both customers and managers:

*“A big aspect of what workers are expected to do is to have a very friendly disposition, and be really bubbly and kind, and those kinds of things that are associated with behaviours that women are meant to have, and that’s expected... I have seen women in particular be told off, or demoted, or be disciplined because of not smiling enough, those types of things, in ways that men just aren’t... (Union Leader)”*

The pandemic, which created new restrictions, goods shortages, and general societal anxiety, led to a rise in the incidence of customer abuse of retail staff (Lipton et al., 2022). Stakeholders commented that, although many retail workers learned on the job to deal with abusive customers, the pandemic had highlighted the need for formalised training, specifically around emotion management, managing customer aggression, and deescalating conflict. For example:

*“As a result of COVID, we’ve just demand-driven developed a skillset on abusive customers, for teaching staff how to deal with abusive customers, because that’s really amped up during COVID. But the reality is, it’s always been there, and often, sort of a very junior person, who has had no training, is expected to basically manage and deal with that, and that’s just completely unrealistic.” (Leader, Public Sector)”*

Interviewees not only acknowledged broad-based customer abuse as a significant problem in the industry, but also that customer-perpetrated sexual harassment was very common. A key issue raised in interviews was what was perceived to be a limited and inadequate response from employers who they saw as placing the customer as their priority, rather than the safety of retail workers. Stakeholders argued for the need for better systems to address customer abuse, with some noting a lack of established processes, unclear procedures or insufficient support provided to retail employees from employers.

*“When workers are being harassed and abused in that workplace, the abusers make complaints, and they get given gift cards. Then, every day, there’s all sorts of forms of harassment and abuse, which workers are just told to suck up.” (Union Leader)”*

## Summary

The undervaluation of retail work emerged as a common theme in our stakeholder interviews, which is characterised by high levels of worker precarity, low pay, low status, and low respect. The undervaluation of retail work presents a significant problem for the industry, becoming embedded in the wage structure and status of retail work. This is reflected in low pay and a lack of recognition of retail skills and capabilities. Despite being a workforce dominated by women, men are more likely to ascend to more senior retail positions. Stakeholders expressed concern that women do not receive enough opportunity and support to succeed in the industry, even in the presence of a growing number of leadership development programs. Although, the structure of such leadership roles was called into question, due to long working hours that were perceived as clashing with caregiving. Disrespectful behaviours perpetrated toward retail workers was identified as very concerning by interviewees, with workers continuing to experience gender-based abuse and sexual harassment from within their workplaces (e.g., managers and supervisors) and customers. The persistent nature of the issues identified here signifies that greater action must be taken to improve workplace civility and respect in the retail sector.

# Survey of Retail Workers

In addition to our interviews with senior industry leaders and stakeholders, we surveyed retail workers on their views about gendered disrespect and inequality in the retail industry. We compared and contrasted workers on four key demographic factors, including gender identity, employment status, frontline worker status, and language spoken at home. Worker status was divided into three categories to capture a variety of job types. Frontline workers were characterised as those employed in customer-facing service roles (e.g., sales assistant; store manager; assistant or department manager; checkout operator and cashier; retail supervisor; online shopper / personal shopper / online fulfilment; pharmacy assistant), whereas non-frontline workers were divided into those working in non-customer facing roles, (e.g., distribution workers, shelf stackers / store replenishment, online shoppers, warehouse workers, fast-food cooks and kitchenhands), and non-frontline workers in professional retail roles (such as office workers in corporate environments, visual merchandisers, purchasing and supply logistics clerks).

The breakdown of our sample (n = 1,160) is as follows:

- Gender identity: women 61%, men 39%
- Employment status: full-time 40%, permanent part-time 22%, casual 38%
- Frontline worker status: frontline 64%, non-frontline (distribution) 22%, non-frontline (office) 14%
- Language spoken at home: only English 81%, a language other than English, 19%

## Voice and opportunity at work

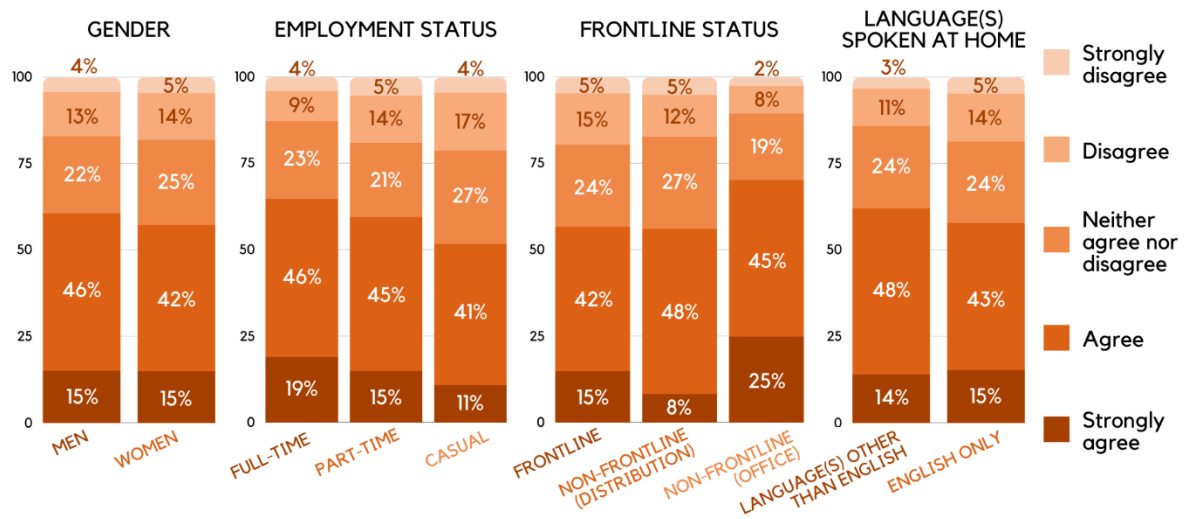
Building on the insights gained in our stakeholder interviews, we asked retail workers for their views on whether one's voice is heard in relation to important matters at work and if there is equal access to leadership roles, pay rise and promotion. 'Worker voice' is regarded as the ability to have a say in important matters at work, and to potentially influence work practices and outcomes (Budd et al., 2010; Wilkinson et al., 2020). Worker voice is an important marker for inequality, and when a gendered lens is applied to the operation of voice, important understandings may be gained regarding how women and men perceive their respective influence over workplace matters (Cooper et al., 2021).

### *Worker voice*

As shown in Figure 2, differences emerged in how women and men rated their ability to express their voice at work, with 61% of men and 57% of women agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement 'I feel that they my voice is heard in relation to important matters at work'. Employment status appeared to have an influence on workers' perception of voice, with approximately half (52%) of casual workers either agreeing or strongly agreeing that their voice was heard compared to 60% of part-time workers and 65% of full-time workers. Frontline status also appeared to have an impact on perceptions of worker voice, with 57% of frontline workers and 56% of non-frontline (distribution) workers agreeing or strongly agreeing that their voices have been heard. In contrast, 70% of workers in non-frontline (office) roles agreed or strongly agreed that their voices were heard. These findings suggest that retail workers who were insecurely employed (e.g., casual workers) did not feel that they could speak up at work and raise important matters (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Views on whether one's voice is heard in relation to important matters at work

**To what extent do you agree or disagree that I feel that my voice is heard in relation to important matters at work?**



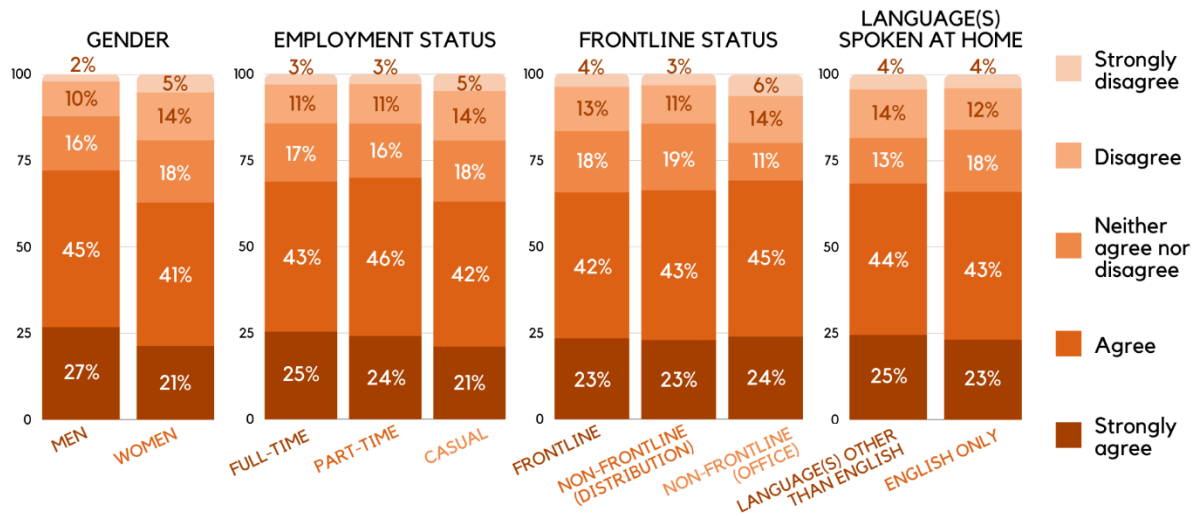
Note: n = 1,115

**Opportunity**

Next, we asked retail workers about their access to opportunities for progression and better remuneration in the workplace. Although a majority of retail workers we surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that men and women have equal access to leadership roles and the same opportunities for pay rises and promotions, men were more likely to hold these views than women. Two-thirds of workers agreed or strongly agreed that women and men have equal access to leadership roles (66%). Yet, there was a clear gender divide in relation to these perceptions. With regard to access to leadership roles, 72% of men agreed or strongly agreed that women and men to have equal access to leadership roles, compared to 62% of women. Interestingly, part-time workers were more likely to agree or strongly agree that women and men have equal access to leadership roles (70%), compared to full time workers (68%) and those who were employed casually (63%) (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Views on whether women and men have equal access to leadership roles

**To what extent do you agree or disagree that women and men have equal access to leadership roles?**

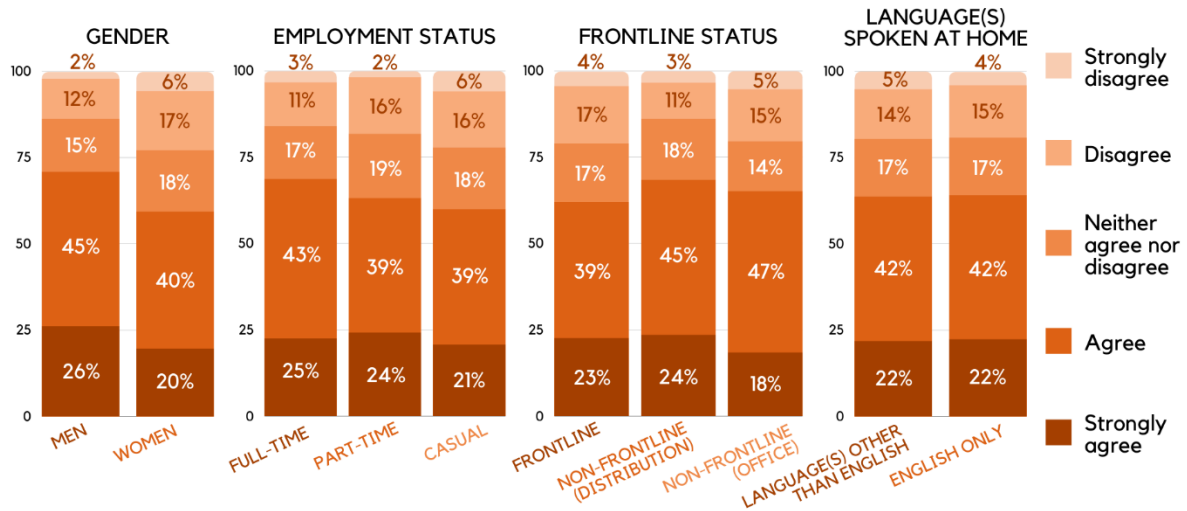


Note: n = 1,109

With regard to opportunities for pay rises and promotions (see Figure 4), men were more likely to agree or strongly agree (71%) that women and men have the same opportunities for pay rises and promotions, compared to 60% of women. Compared to their casually employed counterparts (60%), there was a stark difference between whether full-time workers agreed or strongly agreed that they have equal access to pay rises and promotions (68%). However, there was a smaller difference between casual and part-time workers perceptions of this issue (63%).

Figure 4: Views on whether women and men have the same opportunities for pay rise and promotion

### To what extent do you agree or disagree that women and men have the same opportunities for pay rise and promotion?



Note: n = 1,097

#### Summary: Voice and opportunity at work

Gender shapes worker perceptions of their voice and their access to opportunities in the workplace. Overall, gender differences were observed in how men and women perceived the ability to speak up at work, with women less likely to agree or strongly agree that their voice was heard in relation to important matters in the workplace. Employment status also played an important role in whether a retail worker felt they had a voice in relation to important matters at work. The more precarious a worker’s employment status, the less likely they felt they had a say in important matters. These findings are in line with recent research, which demonstrates that when women’s jobs are precarious within feminised industries, women are less likely to have access to voice mechanisms (Cooper et al., 2021). Likewise, gender differences emerged in how men and women perceived access to leadership roles, pay rise and promotion, with women less likely to agree or strongly agree this was the case. Mirroring our stakeholder findings, these results suggest that opportunities for using one’s voice and career progression in the retail industry are unequal for men and women, and especially so for women who are working in more precarious and lower status roles.

## Respect at work

### Customer abuse

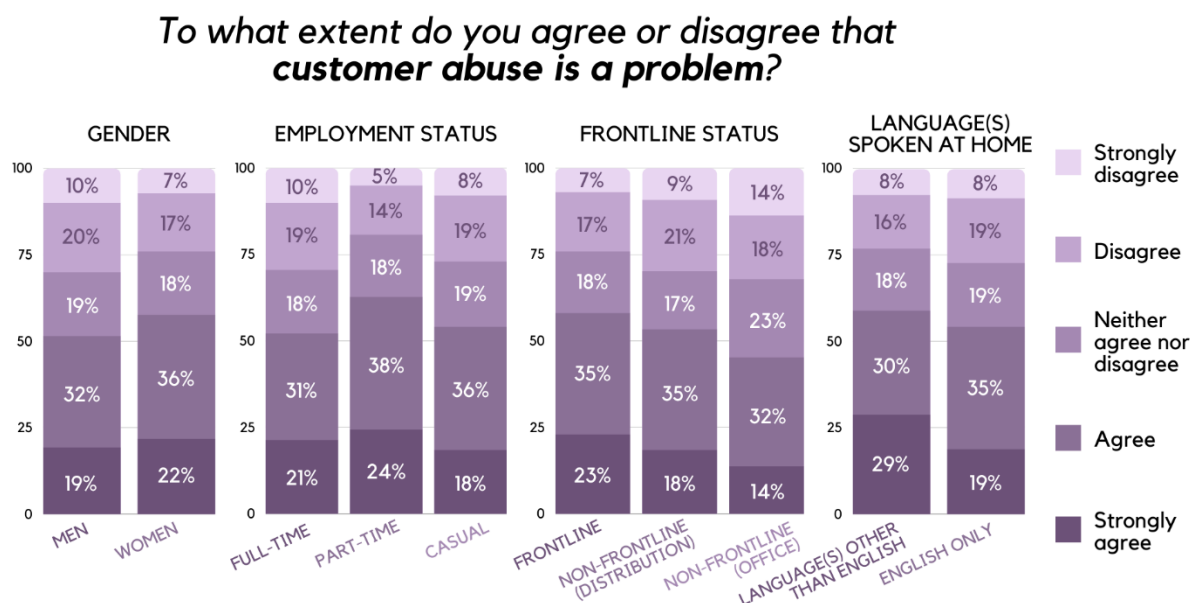
All retail workers have the right to feel safe and respected in the workplace. As illustrated in our interview findings, sexual harassment, customer abuse and gendered disrespect are still prevalent and challenging issues within the retail industry. Our earlier research suggests that these experiences may have been exacerbated during the pandemic period (Vromen et al., 2021). This section examines whether women and men perceive customer abuse and sexual harassment as problems, and whether these problems have been addressed appropriately in the retail industry.

The survey revealed that overall:

- 55% of retail workers agree or strongly agree that customer abuse is a problem.
- 51% of retail workers agree or strongly agree that customer abuse is adequately addressed.
- 44% of retail workers agree or strongly agree that customers treat women and men equally.

More than half of our survey respondents considered that customer abuse in the workplace was a problem. As shown in Figure 5, women were more likely to agree or strongly agree that customer abuse was a problem in the retail industry (58%), compared to men (51%). Similarly, 58% of frontline workers agreed or strongly agreed that customer abuse was a problem, followed by 53% of non-frontline (distribution) workers and 45% of non-frontline (office) workers (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Views on whether customer abuse is a problem



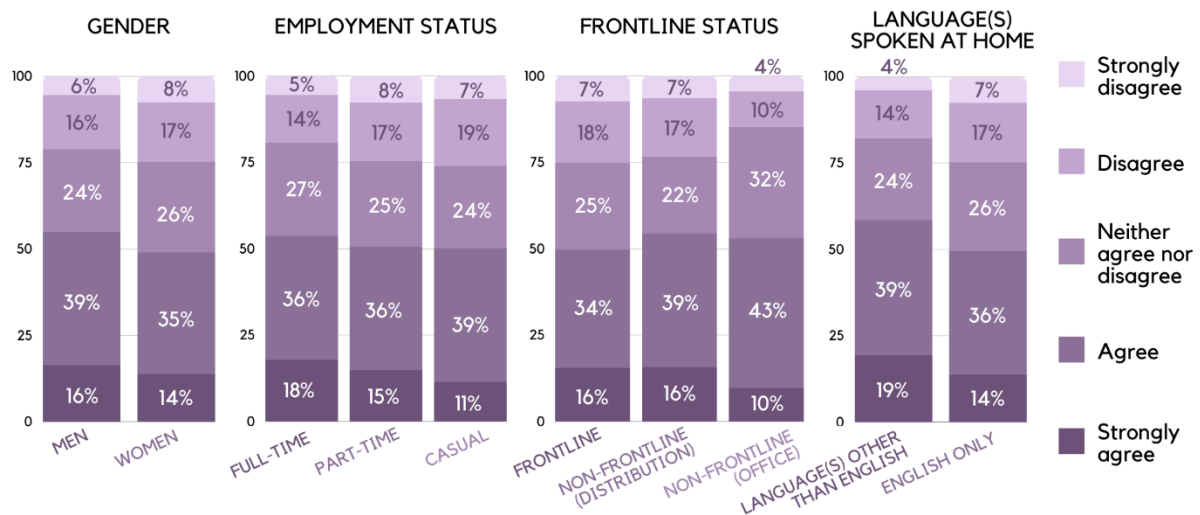
Note:  $n = 1,097$



Around half of all retail workers (51%) agreed or strongly agreed that customer abuse has been adequately addressed in the retail industry, with men more likely to agree or strongly agree (55%), compared to women (49%). Among casual workers, 1-in-10 agreed or strongly agreed that this type of abuse has been addressed adequately (11%). By comparison, 15% of part-time workers and 18% of full-time workers agreed or strongly agreed (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. Views on whether customer abuse is adequately addressed

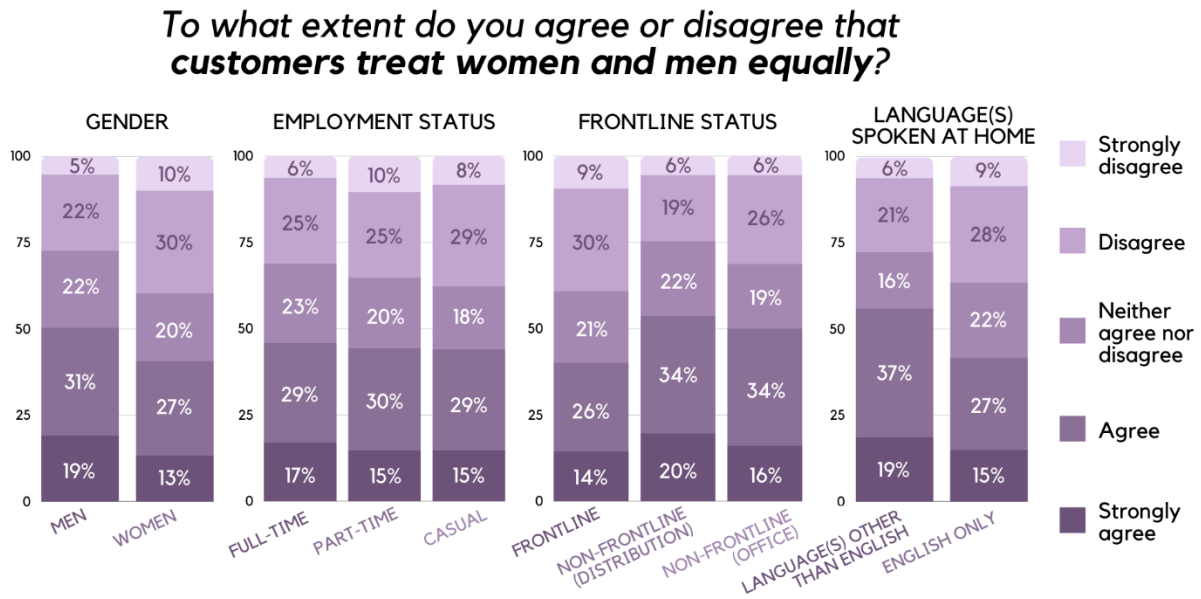
**To what extent do you agree or disagree that customer abuse is adequately addressed?**



Note: n = 1,065

We asked retail workers the extent to which they perceived customers treat women and men equally. Fewer than half of retail workers thought customers treat women and men equally (45%) (see Figure 7). A stark difference emerged between women and men, with men more likely to agree or strongly agree (50%) that women and men are treated equally by customers. By contrast, only 40% of women agreed or strongly agreed. Perhaps unsurprisingly, of all retail workers, frontline workers were the least likely to agree or strongly agree (40%) that women and men were treated equally by customers. Of note, people who only spoke English at home were less likely to agree or strongly agree (42%) that customers treated women and men equally (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. Views on whether customers treat women and men equally



Note: n = 1,096

### Sexual harassment

As has been demonstrated in previous studies, sexual harassment is an acute problem for retail workers, due to the public-facing and service-orientated nature of retail work, combined with the socio-demographic profile of the workforce (Australian Human Rights Commission., 2019; Good & Cooper, 2016). The social norms and working conditions of retail work, such as the close monitoring of workers' behaviour and personal appearance (Brunner & Dever, 2014; Good & Cooper, 2016), expectations of deference to customers (Chamberlain et al., 2008; Korczynski & Evans, 2013), and the mentality that the 'customer is always right', ultimately enables disrespectful behaviour to go unchecked (Korczynski & Evans, 2013).

The survey revealed that overall:

- Nearly 1-in-5 (18%) retail workers have personally experienced sexual harassment at work in the past five years.
- Women (23%) (see Figure 8)<sup>‡</sup> and young people (<30 years old) (23%) were more likely to have experienced sexual harassment at work in the past five years, compared with men and older retail workers.

The five most common behaviours associated with sexual harassment were:

1. Sexually suggestive comments or jokes (62%)
2. Intrusive questions about one's private life or physical appearance (45%)
3. Staring or leering (41%)
4. Physical contact (31%)
5. Someone following, watching, or loitering nearby (29%)

<sup>‡</sup> A small number of "Don't know" and "Prefer not to say" results have been removed from Figure 8.

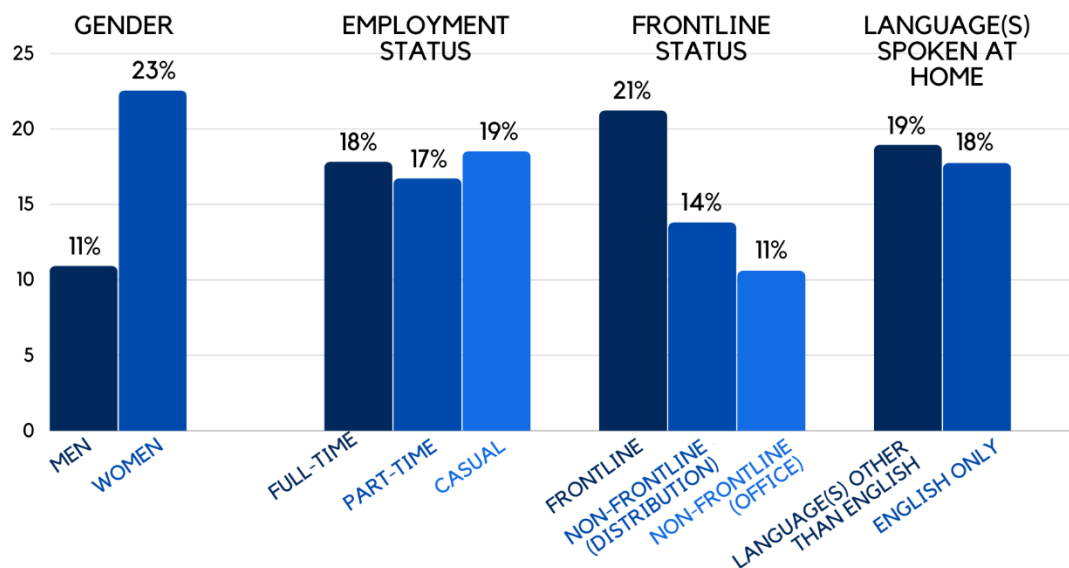
When asked about their relationship to the perpetrator, retail workers listed:

- Someone more senior (36%)
- A customer (34%)
- A co-worker at the same level (23%)
- A co-worker more junior (5%)
- Prefer not to say (2%)
- Don't know (1%)

For those retail workers who had experienced sexual harassment at work, other employees accounted for nearly two thirds of sexual harassment incidences. While managers and supervisors play a particularly important role in preventing sexual harassment in the workplace, they are often a common perpetrator of this behaviour (Tindell & Padavic, 2022). Nevertheless, customers were almost equally responsible as managers for perpetrating sexual harassment against retail workers: a third of workers indicated that they had been sexually harassed by a customer in the workplace. This is consistent with findings from a 2019 survey on sexual harassment among union members working in retail (36%) (Australian Human Rights Commission., 2019). Unsurprisingly, frontline workers were more likely to report experiences of sexual harassment (21%), compared to non-frontline (distribution) (14%) and non-frontline (office) (11%) retail workers (see Figure 8).

Figure 8. Personal experience of sexual harassment at work

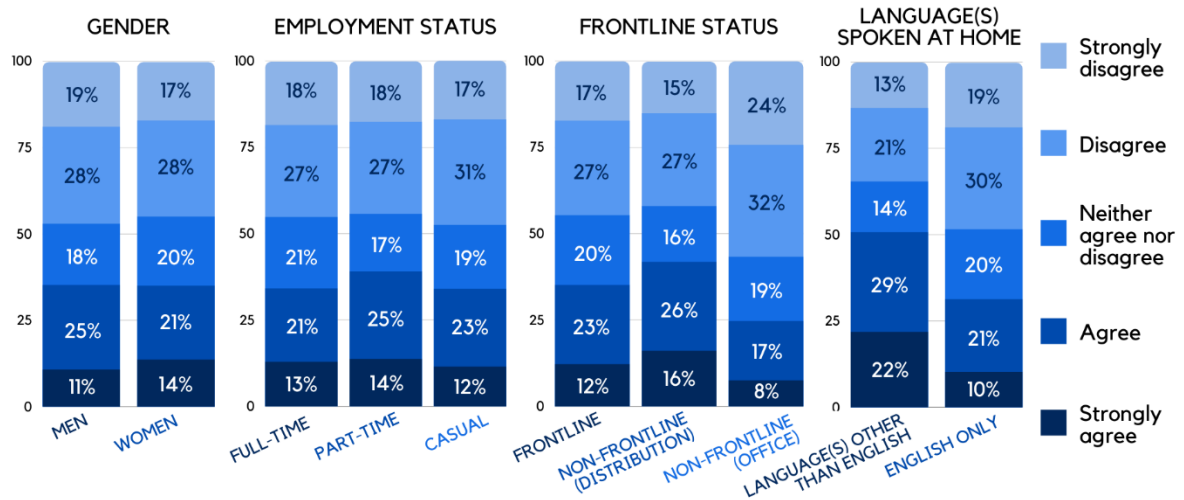
***In the past five years, have you ever personally experienced sexual harassment at work?***



Note:  $n = 1,128$

Figure 9. Views on whether sexual harassment is a problem in your workplace

**To what extent do you agree or disagree that sexual harassment is a problem?**

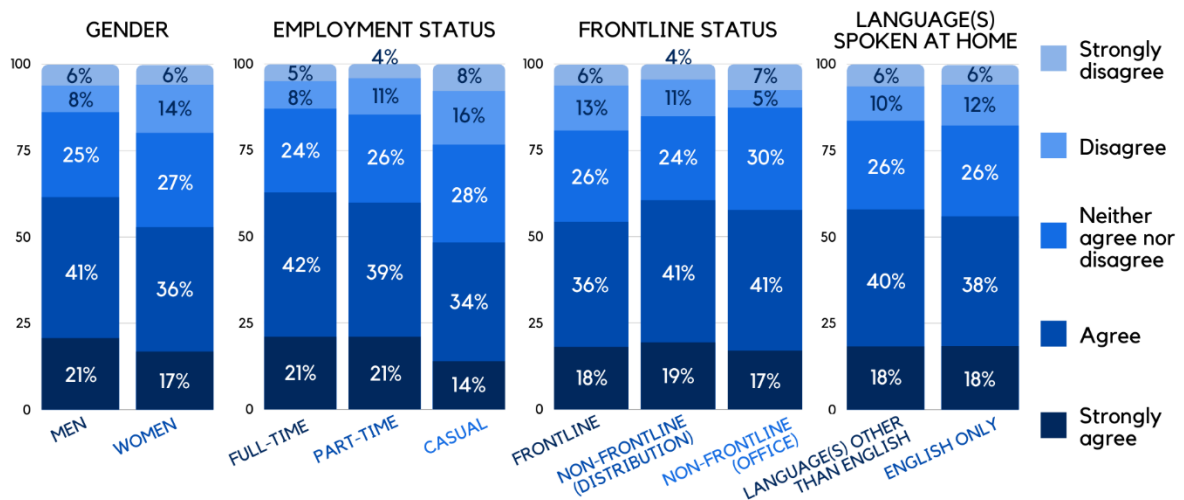


Note: n = 1,080

Just over a third of retail workers agreed or strongly agreed that sexual harassment is a problem in the retail industry, with a similar level of agreement between women and men (35% and 36%, respectively). However, the greatest disparity was found between retail workers from a CALD background and workers who only spoke English at home. People from CALD backgrounds were nearly twice as likely to agree or strongly agree that sexual harassment is a problem (51%), compared to workers who only spoke English at home (31%) (see Figure 9).

Figure 10. Views on whether sexual harassment is adequately addressed

**To what extent do you agree or disagree that sexual harassment is adequately addressed?**



Note:  $n = 1,024$

As shown in Figure 10, just over half of retail workers thought that sexual harassment was being adequately addressed in the retail industry (56%). Similarly, to perceptions of customer abuse, women were less likely than men to agree or strongly agree that sexual harassment is being addressed (53%), compared to men (62%). Casual retail workers were less likely to agree or strongly agree (48%), with comparison to full-time (63%) and part-time (60%) workers.

### **Summary: Respect at work**

Our survey results revealed that while more than half of retail workers considered customer abuse as a problem in the workplace, it was women who worked part-time, and those working in frontline roles who were more likely to perceive that this was a problem. It was also women, people from CALD backgrounds, casual workers, and those in frontline roles who were least likely to think that customer abuse was being adequately addressed in the retail industry. These results are validated by findings from our stakeholder interviews, which also indicate that the severity of customer abuse toward retail workers has only been increasing, a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Likewise, customer expectations of retail workers have also increased, as retail roles transform to keep up with the growth of online shopping. As a result, some frontline, customer-facing roles have become blended with online fulfilment (Lipton et al., 2022). This is consistent with elevated trends in online retail sales (ABS, 2022b). Training, which has been implemented in some stores to instruct workers on how to deal with growing customer abuse and expectations, places onus on retail workers, rather than holding customers accountable for their behaviour. Further, when considering retail workers' perceptions of sexual harassment, a similar pattern emerged. Women and casual retail workers were more likely to experience sexual harassment in the workplace and were also less likely to perceive this behaviour as being adequately addressed in the industry; findings which mirror our stakeholder interviews. The most common perpetrator of this sexual harassment was found to be someone more senior in the retail workplace. Although, there was little difference between retail managers and customers, suggesting that inherent power imbalances exist in the retail industry. This has important implications for the future of the retail workforce and how these issues are addressed, suggesting that continued efforts are far from complete in ensuring that workers (particularly women) feel safe and respected in the retail industry. Of course, disaggregating gender by employment status, frontline status and language(s) spoken at home would provide a more in-depth understanding of how women and men perceive sexual harassment in the retail industry. This will be the subject of future research reports and articles.

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# Appendix

## About this project

This project, *Designing Gender Equality into the Future of Work* uses mixed-methods, action-based research conducted in four phases over a three-year period. This project aims to investigate how women and men understand and experience the changing nature of work and their hopes and fears for the future. This project expects to generate new knowledge about the gendered dimensions of workplace change using an innovative and engaged research design that focuses on the retail industry. Expected outcomes of this project include an enhanced and coordinated capacity to build gender equality into the future of work.

1. This project asks: how do we build upon women’s and men’s current workplace experiences to construct a more gender-equitable future of work? To answer this question, the project uses qualitative interviews, an online survey of practicing solicitors, and industry co-design to: Identify workplace transformations currently unfolding in the retail industry and map connections to gender inequality;
2. Capture how women and men employed in these areas make sense of and respond to workplace changes, and their concerns and hopes for the future; and
3. Develop and test concrete strategies to build an equal and inclusive future of work in the law.

## Methods

### Stakeholder interviews

In the first phase of our research, we interviewed 30 senior stakeholders in retail and retail adjacent industries. These stakeholders were identified for their expertise in and knowledge of the retail industry, and included leaders in major retailers, academics and retail consultants with expertise in retail business, human resource management, and technology, senior members of state, national and/or international industry associations, senior members of key regulatory bodies, and senior leaders from government, non-profit agencies.

The following table provides a breakdown of senior stakeholders by category:

Category	Stakeholders interviewed
Leader, Food, and Beverages Retail Employer	5
Leader, Home, Work, and Lifestyle Retail Employer	3
Leader, Retail Management and Logistics	4
Leader, Industry Association	3
Leader, Public Sector	3
Union Leader	4
Retail Consultant	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>30</b>

Stakeholder interviews, which were conducted between October 2020 and April 2021. Throughout the report we quote verbatim from these interviews. In line with approval received from the University of Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee, and our own commitments to participants, all stakeholders have been assigned pseudonyms and any identifying details have been removed.



## Retail worker survey

A nation-wide online survey was administered by IPSOS Social Research to their online panel between 28th September – 7th October 2021, including a sample of 1,160 aged 16+ workers: 705 women (61%) and 455 men (39%). The highest level of education attained for the majority of respondents was a high school diploma, or some secondary school education (45%), and just under half earned no more than \$40,000 annually (47%) (see Table 1). Survey respondents worked in the following retail industry sectors:<sup>§</sup>

- Specialty and lifestyle retail (n=367, 32%);\*\*
- Food retail (n=321, 28%);††
- Fast-food and takeaway (n=271, 23%);‡‡ and
- Wholesale and logistics (n=225, 19%);§§

The majority of workers report that they have only one job (79%), with a mix of workers being in full time, part time and casual jobs. Among those who have more than one job, the majority claim that their second job is either a casual job (51%) or a part time job (31%). Among those with more than one job the proportion of people working as freelancer is higher than those with only one job (6% vs 1%).

The survey sought to understand perceptions, experiences, aspirations, and anxieties regarding respect, and equality and voice at work among workers in the retail sector. We are also interested in differences amongst retail workers and have compared and contrasted workers on five key demographic factors. We chose these factors to try and unpack the different experiences among retail workers, especially in an industry that compared to the Australian labour market as a whole is disproportionately populated by female, casual and young frontline workers.

The five key demographics are:

- age group (under 30, aged 30-50, or over 50)
- gender identity
- language spoken at home (only English or a language other than English)
- employment status (full-time, permanent part-time, or casual)
- frontline worker status (frontline, non-frontline (distribution), or non-frontline (office))

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<sup>§</sup> Total exceeds 100%, as certain respondents reported more than one job

<sup>\*\*</sup> Reported industry sector (SQ2): Florist; Bookstore; Newsagency; Pharmacy; Jeweller; Fashion apparel store; Entertainment; Communication and technology retailers; Sport, recreation and leisure; Home living store; Homeware, trade and gardening; Franchise, chain and department stores

<sup>††</sup> Reported industry sector (SQ2): Supermarkets; Liquor store; Fruit and vegetable grocer; Specialty food store

<sup>‡‡</sup> Reported industry sector (SQ2): Takeaway business; Fast food retailer

<sup>§§</sup> Reported industry sector (SQ2): Transport, postal and warehousing; Wholesale trade; Manufacturers, producers and importers

Table 1: Demographic descriptions of survey respondents

	<b>Category</b>	<b>Count (n)</b>	<b>Frequency (%)</b>
<b>Age group</b>	< 30	505	44
	30 - 50	396	34
	> 50	259	22
<b>Gender</b>	Men	455	39
	Women	705	61
<b>Language spoken at home</b>	English only	938	81
	Language(s) other than English	222	19
<b>Frontline status</b>	<b>Frontline worker</b>  (i.e., working in one of the following, public-facing roles sales assistant; store manager; assistant or department manager; checkout operator and cashier; retail supervisor; online shopper/ personal shopper/ online fulfilment; pharmacy assistant; "other" positions written in and identified as being frontline)	735	64
	<b>Non-frontline worker (Distribution)</b>  (i.e., working in a non-customer facing-frontline role such as manual/distribution workers: store-person; shelf stacker/replenishment; online shopper/personal shopper/online fulfilment; night-fill; warehouse worker; fast-food cook; kitchenhand)	257	22
	<b>Non-frontline worker (Office)</b>  (i.e., non-frontline office workers: visual merchandiser; warehouse manager; purchasing and supply logistics clerk)	161	14
<b>Employment status</b>	Full-time and permanent	448	40
	Part-time and permanent	247	22
	Casual (including those on short-term contracts and freelance and gig workers)	438	38
<b>Number of jobs</b>	1	924	82.5
	2	172	15.4
	3 or 4	24	2.1
<b>Highest level of education attained</b>	High school diploma; some secondary school	515	44.7
	Vocational diploma/certificate	307	26.7

	Tertiary diploma (undergraduate or postgraduate)	329	28.6
<b>Mean personal income (annual)</b>	< 40,001	506	47.4
	40,001 - 80,000	392	36.7
	> 80,000	169	15.8
<b>Number of children</b>	None	653	56.3
	1 or 2	366	31.6
	3 or more	141	12.2
<b>Care responsibilities</b>	Yes	417	35.9
	No	743	64.1

Table 2: Retail workers' gender by frontline status across linguistic background, employment status, and age

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Language(s) spoken at home</b>	<b>Frontline status</b>		
		Frontline	Non-frontline (distribution)	Non-frontline (office)
Man	Speaks language(s) other than English	49% (n=43)	31% (n=27)	20% (n=17)
	English only	53% (n=194)	29% (n=107)	18% (n=65)
Woman	Speaks language(s) other than English	68% (n=91)	22% (n=29)	10% (n=13)
	English only	72% (n=407)	17% (n=94)	12% (n=66)

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Employment status</b>	<b>Frontline status</b>		
		Frontline	Non-frontline (distribution)	Non-frontline (office)
Man	Full-time	54% (n=130)	20% (n=47)	27% (n=64)
	Part-time	45% (n=35)	48% (n=37)	6% (n=5)
	Casual	54% (n=67)	38% (n=47)	7% (n=9)
Woman	Full-time	62% (n=128)	16% (n=32)	22% (n=45)
	Part-time	75% (n=126)	17% (n=29)	8% (n=13)
	Casual	75% (n=235)	20% (n=61)	5% (n=16)

Gender	Age	Frontline status		
		Frontline	Non-frontline (distribution)	Non-frontline (office)
Man	< 30	58% (n=95)	35% (n=58)	7% (n=12)
	30 - 50	52% (n=82)	25% (n=40)	23% (n=36)
	> 50	46% (n=60)	28% (n=36)	26% (n=34)
Woman	< 30	79% (n=268)	17% (n=56)	4% (n=15)
	30 - 50	65% (n=153)	18% (n=42)	17% (n=39)
	> 50	61% (n=77)	20% (n=25)	20% (n=25)

# Contact

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Gender Equality in Working Life Research Initiative**

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CRICOS 00026A



The Gender Equality in Working Life (GEWL) Research Initiative at the University of Sydney is a multidisciplinary research initiative leveraging several decades of research expertise on women's working lives to establish an action-oriented, practical approach to building a gender equal future of work.

The GEWL Research Initiative offers unique, research-informed insights, developed using new workplace data, to produce targeted and effective gender equality interventions.

We provide nuanced, rigorous and 'next-generation' research, that explores solutions that are:

- **Fit-for-purpose.** Providing an understanding of the different impact on diverse groups, different jobs and with tailored insights and solutions, rather than one-size-fits-all.
- **Mutually beneficial.** Providing an understanding of shared valued outcomes for employees, business, and society.
- **Quantified.** Measuring the short- and long-term outcomes, costs and impacts with relevant analytics.
- **Innovative.** Drawing on evidence from new sectors, pandemic practices & international experience to develop different approaches.

Partnering with business, government and civil society GEWL undertakes rigorous engaged research on gender equality at work and in careers across sectors and industries to co-design evidence-based solutions to pressing problems.

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