

The incidence and patterns of discrimination and harassment affecting working women in Australia

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Abstract

This study explored 9015 cases of discrimination and harassment reported over a three year period (2001-2004) to the Queensland Working Women's Service (QWWS), a community based organisation in Australia which specialises in advice, assistance and advocacy for working women. The quantitative study examined two forms of harassment (workplace bullying and sexual harassment) and six forms of discrimination (age, pregnancy, sex, race, family responsibilities and age) to establish the patterns of occurrence across different demographic categories (e.g., age, industry, occupation, union membership, background). The findings reveal women's vulnerabilities change according to lifecycle stages, and that structural aspects of their employment are of greater significance in determining whether they experience discrimination and harassment than the types of jobs they perform.

Introduction

It has long been established that women experience disadvantage and reduced bargaining power in the workplace, relative to men. Cross-national, macro-level data reveals that employed women tend to be concentrated in industries that are characterised by low pay and low unionism, poor training opportunities and high rates of part-time and casual work (Grimshaw, Whitehouse & Zetlin 2001; Markey, Hodgkinson & Kowalczyk, 2002; Simpson & Stroh, 2002; Wooden & Bora, 1999). Many women also experience discontinuity in employment which exerts downward pressure on wages and benefits, and decreases training and promotion prospects, compared to those who remain in full-time employment (Breusch & Gray, 2003; Hayghe & Bianchi, 1994; Kirby & Krone, 2002; Schwartz, 1989). Further, the need to negotiate flexible working hours to accommodate childcare and domestic responsibilities reduces women's bargaining power in the workplace. Although many organisations have ostensibly shifted to more flexible models of work, the flexibility realised in many enterprise agreements in female-dominated industries has been solely employer-driven (Charlesworth, 1997).

Not only are women concentrated in poor quality jobs they often have extreme difficulty gaining access to genuine flexibility and being provided with opportunities to negotiate their own feminised agendas and conditions of employment that fit with their lives and roles as women. Research and anecdotal evidence that frequents the media has also identified that a concerning number of women are subjected to workplace discrimination and harassment. Prior studies have explored the theoretical underpinnings and antecedents of harassment and discrimination. However, much less attention has focused on what appears to be a fundamental issue in any society concerned about women's participation in paid employment. That is, how widespread are these problems, and under what conditions are they most likely to occur? Sev-

eral commentators have called for greater emphasis on understanding these forms of gendered social processes as they affect power and injustice in employment (Kelly, 1998; Somavia, 2003; Wajcman, 2000). Wajcman (2000) for example, contends that while it can be difficult to distinguish theoretically between the indirect effects of domestic responsibilities arising from the sexual division of labour in households and the gender effects of processes internal to the labour market, the latter has frequently been neglected in employment scholarship.

Much recent literature and broader commentary in Australia has remarked on the erosion of standards of employment and protections for women and vulnerable workers under the Workchoices legislation of the Howard Government (March 2006-Nov2007). Since that time the election of a Labor government has focused attention on gendered employment issues such as pay-equity, work and family and paid maternity leave. Hence, while structural reforms and policy initiatives designed to redress inequities and promote opportunity for increased participation of women in the labour market are critical, there is an imperative to target actions in the workplace to effectively prevent and redress the unfavourable and discriminatory acts against women that fall under the legislative radar. This study extends existing literature by exploring the frequency and demographic patterns of over 9,000 cases of discrimination and harassment that were reported to a specialist advocacy organisation by women in contemporary workplaces in Queensland, Australia. We also consider the potential implications of these research findings, including how they may inform the development of policy and legislation which protects the rights and improves the experiences of women workers.

Discrimination and harassment defined

Two of the most significant labour market issues which cause concern for women are sex discrimination and sexual harassment. The Australian *Sex Discrimination Act 1984 (Commonwealth)* defines sex discrimination as when a discriminator treats the aggrieved person less favourably than, in circumstances that are the same or are not materially different, a person of the opposite sex on the grounds of sex, marital status, breast-feeding, pregnancy or potential pregnancy, or family responsibilities. Similar legislation exists in other developed countries.

Sexual harassment is defined by the *Federal Sex Discrimination Act* as “an unwelcome sexual advance, or an unwelcome request for sexual favours or other unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature and where the other person has reasonable grounds for believing that a rejection of the advance, a refusal of the request or the taking of objection to the conduct would disadvantage the other person...” (Section 28A(3)). Sexual harassment is distinguished from other forms of harassment (e.g., racial harassment) because it considers the salience of power relations between men and women and because, unlike other forms of harassment (e.g., disability harassment), the conduct may be excused as welcome attention (Samuels, 2003).

Other forms of discrimination and harassment affect men and women more equally, including discrimination on the basis of race, sexual orientation or disability, and non-sexual forms of harassment such as workplace bullying. Racial discrimination is defined as adverse treatment of a person or group solely based on one's race, colour or national origin, and not individual merit (Milos & Kleiner, 2000). Non-sexual forms of harassment may include racial or disability harassment. Racial harassment is defined as persistent oral, written or physical conduct directed at a person or group based on one's race, colour or national origin where the offensive behaviour is intimidating and/or demeaning and may include verbal slurs, invectiveness or epithets (Milos & Kleiner, 2000).

In Australia, both federal and state legislation proscribes discrimination (on grounds such as sex, pregnancy, disability and race) and sexual harassment and adopt a similar approach

to each other (Ronalds & Pepper, 2004). The federal jurisdiction is covered by the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984*, the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975*, the *Age Discrimination Act* and the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*. The Queensland jurisdiction is covered by the *Anti-Discrimination Act 1991*. At the federal level, complaints are made to the Sex Discrimination Commissioner and hearings are conducted by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC). At the State level in Queensland, the *Anti-Discrimination Act 1991* requires that complaints are made to the Anti-discrimination Commissioner and heard by the Anti-discrimination Tribunal. The industrial relations jurisdictions, both state and federal, also prohibit the termination of employees for discriminatory “unlawful” reasons and provide access by way of application for redress if discrimination is found to be the basis for the dismissal.

The concept of ‘bullying’ or workplace harassment has become a widely accepted way of naming the array of lower-level aggression experienced at work. The level of recent interest and concern regarding workplace bullying, and attention through successful legal claims in the civil courts, has prompted a number of countries, including Australia, to develop anti-bullying codes and guidelines. However, few countries have enacted specific legislation which provides statutory protections for employees. Although bullying is essentially a form of harassment, anti-discrimination legislation does not provide remedies for workplace bullying unless the harassment is based on individual attributes such as race, age, religion and so on. However, some recourse to compensation may be possible in certain circumstances, for example, if the bullying resulted in a workplace injury, an individual could apply for compensation under the *Workers Compensation and Rehabilitation Act* (2003).

Prevalence and patterns of discrimination and harassment

Studies which have explored the prevalence of discrimination and harassment and the conditions under which they are most likely to occur, generally address the issue(s) in one of four ways. First, the prevalence or incidence of the problem is specified at a geographic level, either nationally or at a more local level, and *across* industries and occupations. For example, of the 596 work-related complaints accepted by the Anti-Discrimination Commission of Queensland (ADCQ) during 2002/2003, 22.2 percent were on the grounds of sexual harassment, 21.0 percent were on the grounds of sex discrimination and 5.7 percent as a result of pregnancy (ADCQ, 2003). A study of a random sample of 1,000 participants commissioned by HREOC found that 28 percent of adult Australians had experienced sexual harassment at some time; 41 percent of women and 14 percent of men (HREOC, 2004). The high incidence of sexual harassment in Australia has been mirrored in other countries (e.g., Gutek, Cohen & Konard, 1990; Crocker & Kalember, 1999). Analyses of sex discrimination complaints indicate that complaint processes established by anti-discrimination legislation are under-utilised (e.g., HREOC, 2004; Hunter, 1992). Thus, even when formal complaints statistics are available, they may not be the best indication of the prevalence of sex or other forms of discrimination, particularly in marginalised and insecure employment arrangements where reporting is likely to be less frequent.

For other, less-gendered forms of discrimination, around 15 percent of work-related complaints reported to ADCQ are on the basis of impairment (such as disability), 7.5 percent on the grounds of race and 7.9 percent on the basis of age (ADCQ, 2003). National data in relation to the incidence of non-sexual harassment (bullying) in Australian workplaces is limited. However, in the United States, one study using a college student sample, found that approximately 14 percent had experienced at least 10 different types of abusive events in their current work situations (Keashly, Trott & MacLean, 1994) while Einarsen et al., (2003) reported that between 10 and 20 percent of employees are bullied annually.

The second way in which discrimination and harassment is reported is in relation to different personal and/or occupational characteristics. However, with the exception of sexual harassment, research which explores these problems across industries and occupations is scarce. A recent meta-analytic review of the incidence of sexual harassment in the United States revealed that this problem is more prevalent in organisations characterised by relatively large power differentials between organisational levels (Illies et al., 2003). Based on more than 86,000 respondents from 55 probability samples, Illies et al. (2003) found that 24 percent of women reported having experienced sexual harassment at work, with lower reported incidences in the academic sector and higher reported incidences for military samples. A Canadian study found that nearly half of sexual harassment incidents involved co-workers and fellow employees, while clients/customers and workplace superiors constituted 30 percent and 23 percent of episodes, respectively (Crocker & Kalembra, 1999). Almost half of the incidents occurred in work settings with more women than men (Crocker & Kalembra, 1999). In the United Kingdom, work setting characteristics such as occupation and seniority have been found to be stronger predictors of self-reported harassment than personal demographics such as age or marital status (Burke, 1995). In Australia, sexual harassment occurs across businesses of different sizes and almost a quarter of reported cases involve sexual physical behaviour, indicating a degree of seriousness that required urgent action by employers (HREOC, 2002).

Third, discrimination and harassment has been investigated for specific occupational groups or industries. Kornstein, Norris and Woodhouse (1998), in a United States study of women in the medical profession, for example, reported that gender discrimination was widely experienced. It took many forms including harmful sexual stereotypes, biases against women, exclusion of women from certain disciplines in medicine and inadequate accommodations for pregnancy and family responsibilities (Kornstein et al., 1998). Other studies have demonstrated that nurses and policewomen experience disproportionately high rates of sexual harassment, racial harassment and sex discrimination than other professions (Kinnard, McLaurin & Little, 1995; Pogrebin, Dodge & Chatman, 2000; Shields & Wheatley Price, 2002). Loosemore and Chau, (2001) studied Asian construction workers in Australia and found that 40 percent of the sample believed they had experienced racial discrimination which had negatively impacted on their employment rights, while 61 percent had experienced racial intimidation. Although these studies report blatant racial discrimination which occurs in the course of employment and in hiring and promotion decisions, more commonly it takes the more covert form, manifesting as subtle prejudice such as avoidance, unfriendly communication or failure to provide assistance (Brief & Barsky, 2000; Deitch et al., 2003; Dovidio et al., 2001).

The final way in which discrimination and harassment is reported is by indicating whether the incidence of the problem is increasing or decreasing over time. A HREOC report noted that the number of complaints about sexual harassment in Australian workplaces had increased by just over 20 per cent over a four year period (HREOC, 2002). The incidence and severity of bullying also appear to be increasing (Mayhew et al., 2004) although longitudinal gender-related statistics are scarce. In the United States, Mai Le and Kleiner (2000) reviewed empirical research concerning race discrimination at work and reported that in the previous year, private sector employees filed more than 77,000 complaints of discrimination with the Equal Employment and Opportunity Commission (EEOC), up more than fifty percent from the year before. Also in the United States, Brecheen & Kleiner (2000) reported the number of religious discrimination charges filed with state and federal agencies increased nearly 25 percent between 1990 and 1994.

The Current Study

The principal aim of this study was to explore the frequency and patterns of discrimination and harassment reported to the Queensland Working Women's Service (QWWS) over a three year period. QWWS is one of a group of state-funded, non-union, community based organisations throughout Australia that specialises in advice, assistance and advocacy for working women. They were founded in 1994 on the basis that women were more likely to be disadvantaged in the workplace, and have less access to information and representation than their male counterparts. Data collected by QWWS helps to identify the experiences of women in workplaces that are characterized by lower rates of unionism, smaller numbers of employees, often in the private sector, and within certain industries, particularly clerical, sales and personal services. Advice, mediation and/or legal processes may be undertaken with complainants, depending on individual situations and resource and funding priorities. There is a range of factors which may influence the choice of jurisdiction, such as corresponding provisions across federal and state Acts, maximum limit for damages in State Acts, time limits set for lodging a complaint and personal preference.

The study, which explored 9015 cases reported to QWWS between 1st July 2001 and 30th June 2004, addressed the frequency of reporting in each category of alleged discrimination (age, race, disability, sex, pregnancy, family responsibilities) and harassment (sexual or workplace harassment, also known as bullying). For each of these categories of reporting, we also examined which demographic characteristics (e.g., age category of respondent, industry where employed) were of most concern? All complainants in the sample were female and residing in Queensland at the time of contact.

Overall, the sample of women who sought assistance were slightly more likely to reside outside the Brisbane metropolitan area compared to those living in the capital city and were most likely to be aged between 25 and 44 years of age as opposed to younger or older women. Only around 10% of the sample was from a non-English speaking or Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander background. The two most common industries represented in the data were retail and health/community, reflecting a similar proportion of Queensland women working in these industries in total. The most commonly represented occupational groups were sales/personal service workers and clerical workers; also similar to the proportion of Queensland females in these occupations in total (ABS, 2002). Only one-quarter of the women contacting the service belonged to a union and these were predominantly from education and health. Many of these unionised women had previously contacted their union with their complaint before phoning QWWS but had not been responded to in a way they believed was satisfactory. For non-union members, QWWS was often the only cost-free and employment-specific service available from which to seek assistance.

Enquiry categories were not mutually exclusive, that is, an individual may have reported more than one issue (for example, age discrimination and workplace harassment). Thus, 9,015 cases of enquiry equated to 7881 individuals. Due to the categorical nature of all variables, analysis (using SPSS Version 11.5) consisted largely of cross-tabulations and chi-squares for the variables of interest (e.g., type of complaint by industry) to establish macro patterns of employment-related concerns for women workers.

Results

Frequency of complaints and appropriate responses

The total number of calls received by the QWWS, a small organisation staffed by five full-time equivalent employees, was very large and indicative of a high need for the provision of serv-

ices for women to discuss workplace concerns. A staggering 5,000 women (one-quarter of the sample) reported workplace harassment/bullying to QWWS over the three year period. This problem has been receiving increased attention in recent years. The emotional injury and stress caused by this covert form of occupational violence is considered to at least equal the trauma following overt assaults (Mayhew et al., 2004) and has been estimated to cost Australian employers between 6 and 36 billion dollars per annum and \$17,000 to \$25,000 per case (Sheehan, 2003).

Whilst other categories of harassment and discrimination were somewhat less frequent than bullying, they were still concerning. Sexual harassment was reported by 1,243 women, or around one in 6 women in the sample. Discrimination that is unlawful under the Commonwealth *Sex Discrimination Act 1984*, including the grounds of sex, pregnancy and family responsibilities, amounted to 1,447 cases or 16% of the sample. Less frequent were the categories race discrimination (263 cases), age discrimination (337 cases) and disability discrimination (451 cases), together constituting 1,051 reports or 12% of total cases.

The frequency of pregnancy discrimination cases in the previous three years was high, especially given HREOC's claim that a relatively small number of pregnant women are employed at any given time and that many further instances probably go unreported (HREOC, 1999). Discrimination against employed pregnant women is at odds with policies aimed at promoting work-life balance and increasing Australia's fertility rate which, at 1.73 (ABS, 2002), is currently well below replacement level. The incidence of pregnancy discrimination and family responsibilities discrimination found in the data (together comprising over 1,000 cases), suggests the rhetoric that Australian industry is supporting a healthy integration between work and family life, is not a reality in many workplaces.

The availability of services which offer information, referral, and legal and industrial advice as a response to these problems is very limited, especially since community legal services generally focus on criminal and family law. The large number of requests for specialised information and clarification of issues may also reflect a need for increased community awareness of employment-related rights and responsibilities, especially in relation to women-specific concerns. However, workplace issues are often complex and can threaten job security which affects the family income, so a service which employs legally trained personnel is appropriate even where high levels of community awareness exist. Although some of the contacts to QWWS consisted of a short, single phone call, four-fifths required specialised assistance and over 500 enquiries led to labour-intensive casework input.

Individual characteristics and life cycle patterns

Younger women in the 18 to 25 year age bracket were significantly more likely to report sexual harassment and pregnancy discrimination, and significantly less likely to report workplace harassment. In contrast, older women over 45 were more likely to report age, race and disability discrimination and workplace bullying. Women in the 25 to 44 age group, consistent with the prime childbearing and rearing years, were over-represented in cases related to family responsibilities discrimination. This pattern of reporting across age groups suggests women's vulnerabilities change according to developmental or lifecycle stages; young women are more susceptible to overt mistreatment such as sexualised or gendered behaviours, while women in the middle adult years are more prone to differential treatment based on gendered and special needs such as child-rearing responsibilities. The data show that older women, on the other hand, may find themselves excluded from labour market opportunities based on their age or through workplace bullying.

As expected, non-English speaking background NESB women were over-represented in race

discrimination categories, particularly those employed in primary industries, a group which predominantly resided in regional areas. Indeed, over a quarter of all the NESB and indigenous women who contacted the service described circumstances related to race discrimination. This result suggests a lack of support for diversity and cultural difference in the regional primary industry sector, although further research would be required to confirm this proposition. NESB women, partly as a result of being older as a group than English-speaking background or indigenous women, were also over-represented in cases of age discrimination.

Indigenous women were also more likely to report race discrimination but were not disproportionately represented in any other category of enquiry. The overall numbers of women from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds phoning the service were relatively small. Given the difficulties indigenous women face in the labour market, it is likely that they are not accessing advocacy services that do not specifically cater for indigenous people or provide access to indigenous workers. Supporting this notion, the Northern Territory Working Women's Centre has documented significant increases in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women contacts following the employment of an indigenous advocacy worker. The data also indicate that enquiries were more complex for both NESB and indigenous women with more than twice the proportion of these women reporting three, four of five types of enquiry in a single call, compared to women of English-speaking background.

Discrimination and harassment in different employment arrangements

Overall, clerical workers and personal service workers were consistently the highest proportions of occupational categories across all enquiry categories. This is largely accounted for by the fact that together, they make up nearly half of all employed women in Queensland (ABS, 2002). With one or two exceptions, occupational type was consistently reported across all categories of enquiry. That is, while significant differences were found across employment status, industry, age and background for many of the harassment and discrimination types, the specific occupations in which these problems occurred was relatively evenly distributed. Thus, it is not so much what women do in their day to day job tasks which is important in determining whether they will experience discrimination and harassment. Rather it is the structural aspects of their employment, such as where they work and under what arrangements they are employed, that is of greater significance.

Although women employed in more precarious forms of employment (part-time and casual) are generally considered to be at greater risk for internal labour market problems, nearly half of the women who contacted QWWS in the previous three years had permanent full-time jobs. This is likely to be because their permanency affords them more employment rights and that they are more aware of these rights and willing to seek redress should problems occur. Workplace bullying was a notable example of a complaint that was reported significantly more frequently by those in permanent employment (including full-time and part-time arrangements and apprentices) compared to those in precarious employment arrangements (e.g., full-time and part-time casuals). This finding may reflect a greater prevalence of the problem amongst securely employed workers. More likely though, and in contrast to sexual harassment which occurs more frequently for women employed in precarious forms of employment, women in these more regulated employment environments felt more confident in reporting the bullying, and less open to retribution for doing so. In contrast to all other types of grievances, complainants reporting bullying were also more likely to be union members than those not belonging to a union. We reported earlier that many unionised complainants contacted QWWS only after they had sought advice or attempted to seek redress from their union. Hence, women who experience bullying in their workplaces are more likely to 'shop around' for a solution to the

problem and the relative security of their employment arrangements allow them to do so.

These findings provide the first substantive evidence in Australia of the incidence and pattern of the workplace harassment phenomenon across industry sectors, occupational groups and employment statuses. Although public awareness of the problem is increasing and a number of organisations such as the Beyond Bullying Association are working to address the issue (Sheehan, Barker & Rayner, 1999), there is a clear need for further education, research and the development of regulatory structures which aim to minimise the consequences of workplace harassment.

However, it is casual and contingent employees who are most vulnerable in their workplaces and these groups are, as suggested by several sources (e.g., HREOC, 1999; Hunter, 1992), likely to under-utilise services available and often not report discrimination and harassment when it occurs. As well as casual employees, the data indicate that other groups of workers who are vulnerable are those in home-based work arrangements and those not currently in the labour force. Women who indicated they were not employed at the time of contacting the service were especially likely to report four of the six categories of discrimination (family responsibilities, age, race and disability). This finding suggests that these problems were occurring at the point of entry to the labour market, probably in recruitment and selection. Home based workers, many of whom were NESB women, were also significantly more likely to report race discrimination and age discrimination. Breaking the silence with systems and support processes for women in precarious employment arrangements will assist in facilitating the development of feminised workplace agendas, although there is also a role for government in providing the regulatory structures and agendas which support, rather than erode, labour-related rights for vulnerable workers.

A mixed picture emerged with respect to industry and categories of enquiry. Overall, the retail and personal services sectors made up sizeable proportions of most enquiry categories. This finding reflects the higher numbers of women from these industries working in these industries in Queensland overall. Conversely, women from the education and health/community sectors were significantly less likely to report pregnancy discrimination, sex discrimination and sexual harassment. The lower reported incidence of sexual harassment by women in the education sector is consistent with previous research conducted by Illies et al. (2003). However, these authors claim that potentially harassing behaviours actually occur with similar frequency in education as other sectors, but that greater employment security means that women employed in this industry may feel less threatened by these behaviours. Future research would need to investigate this possibility.

Previous research about how gender ratios in organisations affects the prevalence of sexual harassment has varied (e.g., Ellis, Barak & Pinto, 1991; Gutek & Cohen, 1987; McCabe & Hardman, 2005). In the present study, sexual harassment was less of a problem in education and health/community yet more frequent in retail and personal services – all female-dominated industries. This finding could be accounted for by the security of employment practices. Precarious labour (such as casual, part-time and trainee jobs) is commonplace in retail and personal services industries in Australia, whereas in education and health/community, secure employment (such as permanent full-time and part-time jobs) is more the norm (ABS, 2006). Indeed, reports of sexual harassment were disproportionately higher amongst women employed in traineeships compared to the numbers of trainees in the sample. Consequently, the prevalence of sexual harassment may be more a function of precarious employment arrangements than the gender distribution of employees across the organisation or sector.

Overall, complaint statistics reveal a number of industry sectors from which relatively small numbers of complaints were received. These sectors included electricity/water/ construction;

transport/storage; communication; finance/insurance; and cultural/recreation. This finding partly reflects the smaller proportion of Queensland women working in these sectors, which tend to be male-dominated. However, these industries are comprised of larger organisations which tend to have stable employment conditions, more generous work-family policies and more clearly articulated processes for dealing with employee disputes, all of which minimise the potential for internal conflict. In public sector organisations in particular, a relatively highly unionised workforce also means that women have an alternative point of contact when disputes occur. Indeed, women reporting internal labour problems were very unlikely (less than 10% in most categories and much less in some) to be members of a union. This proportion is much less than the rate of unionised adult females in Australia (currently around 23%, ABS, 2003), although union members are often screened out by referral agencies and are more likely to make a complaint or enquiry directly to their respective unions rather than to the community sector. Union membership undoubtedly affords employees protection from many of the problems explored in this data and a formal avenue of redress should difficulties occur.

Limitations of the study and future research

The extrapolation of incidence of complaints made across industries, occupations and other employment characteristics to the pattern of labour market concerns in the wider community must be exercised with some caution. Importantly, the problems reported here are not necessarily representative of the experiences of many women who have positive and productive relationships with their employers and colleagues. Further, we cannot know for certain from this data the reasons for higher levels of reporting in certain areas. For example, high levels of complaints may indicate that discrimination and harassment frequently occurs, or alternatively that informal resolutions of internal complaints through organisational procedures are not operating effectively. Paradoxically, it has been suggested that workplaces or industries that have higher rates of complaints may reflect that employees feel secure in their employment and confident that the complaints procedure available to them will be effective (HREOC, 1999). Further research is needed to address these issues.

Furthermore, we do not know how many of these complaints are unfounded. Some writers argue that the prevalence of complaints made by women about events in the workplace is over-estimated, or what Magley et al. (1999) refer to as the 'whiner hypothesis'. However, a recent meta-analysis by Illies et al. (2003) in relation to sexual harassment, revealed that the rate of reports (by women's own definitions) was less than half the incidence of reports of potentially harassing incidents believed by researchers to constitute sexual harassment. Illies et al (2003) study showed that women are reluctant to label offensive experiences as sexual harassment and thus constituted strong evidence against the "whiner hypothesis".

Although the investigation of industries and occupations across categories of enquiry reveal macro-level patterns of reporting across Queensland, the specific jobs and organisations in which these women were employed were not available in the data. For example, we do not know the proportion of chefs, bakers, carpenters or hairdressers which make up total numbers of tradespersons or the size of the outlets (e.g., corner store versus large multi-national chain) which are represented in the retail sector. This level of analysis is warranted because it will enable more targeted strategies and awareness campaigns for specific occupational groups and types of organisations. Developing a better understanding of these large scale patterns of internal labour market issues and their relationships to employment policy and community attitudes, is likely to be an essential component of developing feminised bargaining structures and institutions and more female-centric workplaces.

Conclusion

This study has provided a large-scale overview of the incidence and patterns of internal labour market concerns for women in Queensland, Australia and which have traditionally been neglected in labour market literature. The organisation, which specialises in 'grass roots' advice, assistance and advocacy for working women, was ideally placed to reveal more detailed patterns of discrimination and harassment than those dealt with by more formal, legal avenues such as industrial relations, anti-discrimination and human rights commissions. The findings suggest that a substantial number of women in a wide range of industries, occupations and employment arrangements continue to experience serious problems in their workplaces. As greater numbers and diversity of women participate in the labour market and contribute to an increasingly global economy, it is hoped the results of this study will contribute to government and organisational policy development which will improve the social processes affecting women's employment opportunities and ultimately, the quality of their working lives.

KERRIANN DEAR has worked as an advocate for women's issues in Industrial Relations since 1998. Since 2003 as the Director of the Queensland Working Women's Service her role has included representing women in industrial and human rights jurisdictions, making policy submissions to state and federal governments on women's employment and conducting research on data that has been collected through the organisation. Kerriann Dear was also the founding Coordinator of the Young Worker's Advisory Service in 2001 and has been active in drawing attention to the issues faced by young people in the workplace through her research, advocacy and policy activities.

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