

Lawyers to be asked about extent of sexual harassment

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12:30AM AUGUST 9, 2019 •  1 COMMENT

Victorian Legal Services Board commissioner Fiona McLeay has set her sights on tackling sexual harassment among lawyers, with a survey that asks about 20,000 of them in the state to share their experiences anonymously.

“We’re serious about addressing sexual harassment in the Victorian legal profession,” she said.

“The legal profession, as a fundamental pillar of the Victorian justice system, cannot be quiet in addressing this kind of conduct.”

Previous surveys have identified high rates of bullying and sexual harassment in the legal profession.

An International Bar Association survey released earlier this year revealed that of the 900 Australian lawyers who responded, 47 per cent of women had been sexually harassed and 13 per cent of men.

However, Ms McLeay said more information was needed on the extent of sexual harassment in the profession and her survey — launched yesterday — would hopefully provide accurate data.

The survey covers sexual harassment of any kind, including suggestive jokes and comments to inappropriate touching.

“It is our hypothesis that sexual harassment is occurring and that it is very under-reported, so we want to get a baseline of solid data and use that to inform how we respond ... so we can understand what types of behaviour are most prevalent,” Ms McLeay said.

The survey is not limited to lawyers; it will also be sent to legal assistants, administrative assistants and law students.

A separate survey examines what training, policies and processes firms have in place to deal with sexual harassment.

Ms McLeay said if firms did not have any training, policies or processes in place, the board had powers to force them to be implemented.

The survey comes after the NSW legal watchdog last month launched an initiative to encourage lawyers to come forward anonymously with information about bullying and sexual harassment in the profession.

The state's Legal Services Commissioner, John McKenzie, said the information would be used to build up databases on any problem law firms.

The information could then help him form the view there were "reasonable grounds" for conducting a compliance audit.

However, it could not be used to commence disciplinary action unless a complainant was willing to go on the record.

Since the initiative was launched, about 15 lawyers have provided information about their experiences of bullying and sexual harassment.