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Tell us your sexual harassment stories, says law regulator

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A survey of 20,000 lawyers is expected to lift the lid on sexual harassment in the profession and cause a rethink on how practitioners interact with co-workers and clients.





"We have a problem" ... Victorian Legal Services Commissioner Fiona McLeay. **Supplied**

The Victorian Legal Services Board and commissioner Fiona McLeay say they want to hear about any incidents of inappropriate behaviour, from unwelcome touching and suggestive jokes to repeated and unsolicited invitations.

Ms McLeay said she wants solicitors, barristers, legal assistants, administrative staff, law students and others in the legal sector to complete the survey, as well as members of the public.

The anonymous survey will be launched on Friday, along with an audit of what procedures are in place at legal workplaces to handle incidents.

It promises to be more comprehensive and detailed than a [global study of 7000 lawyers by the International Bar Association](#) which reported that one in three

women claimed to have been sexually harassed.

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The survey's impact will extend across state borders, given that Victoria and NSW are foundation members of the national legal profession project. When Western Australia joins the national body it will cover 75 per cent of Australian lawyers.

Ms McLeay said the board was "serious about addressing sexual harassment".

"People have said to me they think there is a problem with sexual harassment in the profession and it would be great if the regulator could do something about it," she said.

Power imbalances

"Not just women, but men also saying 'there are some issues here'.

"The law is quite hierarchical and there are some power imbalances that come into play. Then there are people whose behaviour is just inappropriate, and they don't realise it or perceive the effect on others."

The peak national body for lawyers, the Law Council, [has called for an end to the "culture of silence" around sexual harassment](#), saying it is "one of the greatest challenges facing the legal profession".

The survey to be conducted by Ipsos will ask participants what they've experienced or witnessed, how common they believe sexual harassment is in the legal industry,

and whether there were any reports or complaints to management or authorities after an incident.

There will be an open link on the board's website for former lawyers and staff of lawyers and legal clients.

The survey follows a statement in February from the board, which warned it would "receive, initiate our own complaints where appropriate, and in either case use the powers we have" to address sexual harassment.



The Victorian regulator wants to hear from lawyers and their clients about sexual harassment in the profession. **Nic Walker**

Ms McLeay said there had been an influx of lawyers after that who contacted the regulator to tell their stories.

"Some of those people said to us: 'I've had enough. These things have happened to me over a number of years and now I want to tell somebody about it.'"

She said there was now a dedicated team to handle calls about sexual harassment, which could lead to a lawyer being banned for serious misconduct and/or bringing the profession into disrepute.

Call in the police

The regulator has not yet taken this ultimate step, but Ms McLeay said lawyers were well aware of the powers. "We can also take matters to the police if we think the conduct is of a serious enough nature."

NSW Law Society chief executive Michael Tidball said there would be great interest in the results.

"The leadership of the profession needs to step up to the plate on this issue and not play small targets," he said.

He added that it was "important that we promote the idea of safety for those who wish to disclose".



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