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The Workplace Context of Sexual Harassment in Australia: Policing the Gender Borders

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The paper draws on a three year Australian Research Council funded project entitled Sexual Harassment in Australia: Context Outcomes and Prevention. The research to date suggests there is some slippage between legal definitions and community understandings of what constitutes sexual harassment. Moreover, while sexual harassment is often seen by the community and within organisations as the fault of one aberrant individual, in certain workplace contexts sexual harassment is used to 'police the gender borders', that is to exclude women and men who do not conform to the dominant workplace gender norms. This type of sexual harassment is a collective form of behaviour often perpetrated by co-workers in male-dominated workplaces which is designed to humiliate 'outsiders' so they appear incompetent and will be forced to leave the organisation. While much previous research that has focused on this type of sexual harassment has taken place in military and policing settings, our emerging findings suggest that it is present in a far broader range of workplace contexts. Prevention of this form of sexual harassment is challenging and goes to the heart of organisational culture and work organisation.