



Illustration by Lynne Chapman; commissioned by the Centre for Transformative Work Design

An inquiry into sexual harassment against women in the FIFO mining industry.

Submission by the Centre for Transformative Work design at Curtin University and the Psychology at Work Laboratory at the University of Western Australia

transformativeworkdesign.com/fifo-mental-health

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Our Expertise

The [Centre for Transformative Work Design \(CTWD\)](#) is a research centre in Curtin University's Future of Work Institute. The Centre for Transformative Work Design was established as part of Professor Sharon Parker's Laureate Fellowship, the most prestigious fellowship awarded by the Australian Research Council. The centre led the [2018 Investigation into Mental Health and Well-Being of Fly-In-Fly-Out \(FIFO\) Workers](#), funded through the Western Australian Mental Health Commission and established as a result of the public inquiry into mental health. As part of this investigation, we systematically reviewed the research literature into FIFO work and mental health, surveyed more than 3000 FIFO workers and conducted interviews with 40 FIFO workers and family members.

The CTWD is also leading the Thrive@Work Initiative, which had some seed funding from the Western Australian Mental Health Commission. Thrive@Work produces assessment tools, training modules, educational materials and other resources to promote employees' positive mental health at work.

The CTWD brings together experts and academics with the collective vision of transforming work to create better lives for workers, better outcomes for organisations, and a better society for all. It has a key role to play in navigating the crucial challenges facing individuals, teams and organisations, such as the pressures arising from globalisation and technological change, and the rising incidence of mental ill-health at work. The Centre staff bring together state of the art expertise and knowledge on the role of workplaces, including FIFO workplaces, for mental health and wellbeing. This knowledge and expertise has been developed and demonstrated through our involvement in numerous research projects into mental health and wellbeing at work.

The here provided insights related to sexual harassment in FIFO work sites are derived and developed based on our expertise and experience of researching wellbeing and mental health and how this is affected by work and workplaces. They are developed based on collaborations of experts at the CTWD and at the University of Western Australia's Psychology at Work Lab. Specifically, the research insights presented in the document are derived from the large-scale FIFO worker investigation described above (conducted in 2018, led by Prof Sharon Parker (Curtin University) and Dr Laura Fruhen (UWA) as well as Dr Jess Gilbert's (Curtin University, CTWD Research Fellow) PhD thesis.

As leading academics in this area, our comments are further grounded in the research literature into these topics and our experience of working in this area. We also draw on insights gained from our investigation into mental health and wellbeing of Fly-In-Fly-Out (FIFO) Workers.

Our research insights

The research we have conducted was primarily concerned with the extent and ways in which FIFO work arrangements are connected with worker mental health. Our research has documented that overall, FIFO workers have worse mental health than other groups. It has also identified the ways in which workplace, personal, and social life factors are connected with FIFO worker mental health. While it did not primarily focus on sexual harassment in FIFO sites, issues related to masculinity and the experiences of women have repeatedly come up in our research.

The survey study conducted in 2018 assessed perceived masculinity norms in relation to male worker mental health. Perceptions of masculinity norms capture views on male gender role norms, which entail perceptions of rules or expectations regarding acceptable masculine and feminine actions and attitudes (Mahalik, Good, & Englar-Carson, 2003). These norm perceptions include the extent to which a man should always seem as manly as other men that he knows, should never back down from a public challenge, or the extent to which acting manly should be the most important goal for all men (Mahalik et al, 2003). There are established connections between perceptions of masculinity norms and the engagement in sexual harassment in the research literature (Burns, 2019), whereby people with these beliefs are more likely to engage in sexual harassment and demean women.

Whilst our research conducted in 2018 did not focus on these links in FIFO workplaces, we found in our survey of N = 3,108 FIFO workers that male workers who perceived higher levels of masculinity norms also reported,

- riskier drinking patterns
- higher levels of perceived burdensomeness (i.e. the perception that others would be better off if you did not exist and a leading indicator of suicidal thought)
- to be less safety compliant (i.e. rule and procedure following) and to participate less in safety activities (i.e. participation in training and initiatives).

Aside from the connections of perceived masculinity norms, this research documented high levels of witnessing and personally experiencing bullying amongst FIFO workers compared to other workers. Bullying is described as negative and sometimes threatening actions aimed at individuals or small groups that are performed somewhat often and over longer periods of time (Agervold, & Mikkelsen, 2004). The research showed that the experience of bullying on site was

- linked to worse depression, anxiety and burnout in FIFO workers.
- Higher levels of suicidal intent as well as perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belonging (i.e.
- Worse emotional and psychological wellbeing in FIFO workers.

Bullying and sexual harassment are described as frequently linked in the research literature (Gruber & Fineran, 2007). While we did not measure sexual harassment directly, we are reporting these findings here as they give insights that speak to the wider culture and context of the FIFO work environments with regards to this related behaviour that speak to threatening behaviour.

In Dr Gilbert's PhD thesis (2019), the dynamics that occur on mine sites for women, including harassment of women, devaluing of women's labour, delegitimising women's expertise, and constructing women as visitors or guests (not belonging) within the mining environment were identified via qualitative analysis with N=20 participants. The quotes below illustrate the nature of the type of harassment and the impact that these actions have on women.

Culture of harassment

Participants in Dr Gilbert's PhD described a known culture of harassment of women. Participants, both men and women, described the challenges of the hyper-masculine environment on mine sites that women must navigate when engaging in a FIFO lifestyle. For example, one participant gave a sense of women's difference of experience on-site stating, "Well, men don't get their bras stolen out of the laundry".

Participants further discussed that although there may be training and talks about appropriate conduct provided by their employers or the site operating company, this may not halt the impact on women. As one participant said:

“As a guy, you can be trained to never say any kind of sexually, discriminatory thing ever, which most guys will do, they're not going to say anything particularly bad, but then there's a young, hot 20-year-old girl in a pair of tight jeans, every guy there is going to look, every guy is. That's going to happen, that'll happen in [place], that'll happen in [place], that'll happen pretty much anywhere. It happens, but it happens to a greater degree on mine sites because you've got like 25% women and then ... You're going to feel it more because there's more eyes, more guys and a lot more power.”

Women described the strategies that were at times required for them to feel safe and supported, which often were social networks of other women working on site. These networks were unofficial, and developed out of necessity, rather than a support system put in place through the workplace:

“They talk about old boy's networks, well we had an old girl's network who worked under this particular person, any females that worked under him, women only lasted about a year in his team before they asked for a transfer. Any females that were in the team often banded together very, very tightly to support each other, and as well any prior members from that team gave their phone numbers to the newbies in that team to call if they had issues. I, on the odd occasion, had a girl in tears that I hardly know because she'd been given my phone number through this tree.”

Constant defence of boundaries

Participants pointed out that while on site, the responsibility was placed on women to ensure their boundaries and personal safety was maintained. Part of this, as this participant talks about, was a sense of women feeling outnumbered, and this prompting a sense of intimidating and risk of being confronted:

“I think physically on-site there are times when you can feel quite outnumbered, you know, men versus women. For me it's not so bad, because I'm an older married woman, so it's not an issue for me, but I know for some of the younger single girls, they can feel quite uncomfortable or hoping they're not confronted.”

While on site, women were also required to alter their way of being in order to manage the demands of the masculine work culture. While at work, as described by this participant, women must be on guard:

“They're still harassed. There are company talks about it. [Name] is two different people when she's at work. She's been to my house and my partner's house, we've had dinner with her, and she's quite a lovely young lady, but when she goes to work, I see the change in her, because she has to put this massive barrier up to combat the sexism.”

Key issues

Across the two studies referred to here, general norms regarding masculinity and behaviours that women are exposed to on FIFO sites were identified. Further, the impact of harassment and sexualised behaviour on women is reflected in the qualitative research reported by Gilbert (2019).

It is important to note that, in addition to the behaviours of the individuals, our research has identified that a culture of masculinity on FIFO sites is detrimental to both men and women's mental health and wellbeing. Moreover, we would argue that it is important to consider that the gender make-up of the workforce (around 80% male, based on our representative sample) and social norms on these sites create a culture that potentially makes sexual harassment more likely.

The insights generated by our research suggest that, while targeting behaviour of individuals and offering support to those exposed to sexual harassment and other such behaviours, a deeper, meaningful culture change is required to address these issues.

For further information on changing a culture of hyper-masculinity in the workplace

If you would like to discuss specific strategies for creating workplace culture change, we invite further discussion with our team.

The below research papers provide an introduction to possible ways to approach gender related workplace culture change:

Albury, K., & Laplonge, D. (2012). Practices of gender in mining. *AusIMM Bulletin*, 1(80), 82-84.

<https://search.informit.com.au/fullText;res=IELAPA;dn=201202253>

Ely, R. J., & Meyerson, D. E. (2010). An organizational approach to undoing gender: The unlikely case of offshore oil platforms. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 30, 3-34. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.riob.2010.09.002>

Laplonge, D. (2016). A toolkit for women: The mis(sed) management of gender in resource industries. *The Journal of Management Development*, 35(6), 802-813. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JMD-07-2014-0078>

For further information on our studies we have referred to, please find links to the full reports below:

Gilbert, J. M. (2019). Between a rock and a hard place: Exploring ways to optimise wellbeing for people who work fly-in, fly-out in the Australian mining industry. (Doctoral thesis). Curtin University, Perth, Australia. Retrieved from <http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11937/77509>

Parker, S., Fruhen, L., Burton, C., McQuade, S., Loveny, J., Griffin, M., . . . Esmond, J. (2018). Impact of FIFO work arrangements on the mental health and wellbeing of FIFO workers. Retrieved from Perth, Western Australia: <https://www.mhc.wa.gov.au/media/2547/impact-of-fifo-work-arrangement-on-the-mental-health-and-wellbeing-of-fifo-workers-full-report.pdf>

Other References

Agervold, M., & Mikkelsen, E. G. (2004). Relationships between bullying, psychosocial work environment and individual stress reactions. *Work & Stress*, 18(4), 336–351.

Burn, S. M. (2019). The psychology of sexual harassment. *Teaching of Psychology*, 46(1), 96-103.

Gruber, J. E., & Fineran, S. (2007). The impact of bullying and sexual harassment on middle and high school girls. *Violence Against Women*, 13(6), 627-643.

Mahalik, J. R., Good, G. E., & Englar-Carlson, M. (2003). Masculinity scripts, presenting concerns, and help seeking: Implications for practice and training. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 34, 123–131.