

# #BreakTheBias

A snapshot of gender bias, discrimination, harassing and/or aggressive behaviour within optometry

# Foreword

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At Optometry Australia we believe respect is paramount and non-negotiable.

We believe people, in all workplaces, have the right to a safe environment and gender equity, and to experience equal opportunity within our profession.

In this context, this year's inaugural #BreakTheBias Survey of Optometry Australia members is a wake-up call.

The fact that 64% of members said they had experienced, encountered or witnessed gender bias, discrimination, harassing and/or aggressive behaviour in the workplace, and 27% feared speaking out in response to these experiences, is confronting and unacceptable.

Moreover, while patient behaviour was cited by the majority as causing the most issues, and almost two-thirds of members said their workplace had an harassment and bullying policy, almost one-third of those who had experienced some form of bias, discriminatory or aggressive behaviour said it had come from a practice owner or manager.

While some of the results are encouraging, a number of them clearly indicate that more work needs to be done to make optometry workplaces safer for all practice staff.

Over the coming months, we are committed to working with you to create the necessary tools, policies, education and training that will help our profession to challenge bias and promote cultures of inclusion within our sector.

We look forward to presenting these initiatives to you.



A handwritten signature in white ink, appearing to read 'Murray Smith', positioned above the printed name.

**Murray Smith**  
National President,  
Optometry Australia

# Survey results snapshot

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This report represents a snapshot of the key results provided to Optometry Australia by members when responding to our inaugural #BreakTheBias survey. The survey was conducted in response to the challenge presented by International Women's Day 2022. It was conducted online from 8 to 31 March 2022 and attracted 317 responses.

*Please note, percentages have been rounded up or down and not all results have been included in this snapshot. For ease of displaying the results, questions have been abridged in this snapshot to how they appeared in the actual survey.*

## Demographics

**317** respondents. All adult age groups were represented.

**74%** female      **24%** male      **1%** non-binary  
**2%** did not identify gender

## Where people work

**80%** in clinical practice      **60%** major city or surrounds  
**25%** in regional centres or supports      **8%** working in towns or country areas

# Beliefs about gender bias in optometry

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Are all genders in optometry treated equally?

45% disagreed 13% neither agreed or disagreed

Should there be more opportunities in optometry for women to take on leadership roles?

48% agreed 42% neither agreed or disagreed

Is transitioning back into the workforce following a career break, such as parental leave, well supported in optometry?

40% agreed 27% disagreed

Is there salary parity between genders in optometry?

43% agreed 35% disagreed

# Gender bias, discrimination, harassing and/or aggressive behaviour in the workplace

## Workplace practices

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Would your request for more flexible hours be supported?

52% said yes

Does your manager consider gender in delegating job assignments?

59% said yes

Have assumptions been made about your career or skills on the basis of gender?

23% have encountered often

41% have encountered sometimes

27% have never encountered

Have you faced suggestions that you are not capable of performing your role due to gender?

6% have encountered often

26% have encountered sometimes

50% have never encountered

Are there any consequences of bias, and/or harassing and aggressive behaviours towards staff in the workplace?

40% said no

## Workplace practices (continued)

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Does your workplace take responsibility and appropriate steps to deal with harassing and/or aggressive behaviour?

19% said yes

27% were unsure

Does your workplace have an harassment and bullying policy?

62% said yes

24% were unsure

Does your workplace offer training in handling gender bias, harassing and/or aggressive behaviour from patients or employees?

28% said yes

41% were unsure

# Experiences

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Have you experienced, encountered or witnessed gender bias, discrimination, harassing and/or aggressive behaviour in the workplace?

64% have

Would speaking out on gender bias, discrimination, harassment and/or aggression as damage your chances of career progression?

27% said yes

Do you fear going to work due to gender bias, discrimination, harassment and/or aggressive behaviour?

8% said they do

Has gender bias, harassing and/or aggressive behaviour happened in your current or previous workplace/s?

68% said yes

How often does harassing and/or aggressive behaviour happen in your current or previous workplace/s?

11% have encountered often

2.5% have encountered sometimes

18% have never encountered

On a scale of 0-100%, what percentage of bias, harassing and/or aggressive behaviour that you have been subjected to, or witnessed, was due to gender?

44% average score given

# Experiences (continued)

## Types of experiences encountered

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Have you encountered sexist or crude remarks, jokes or gestures in your current or previous workplaces?

9% have encountered often

60% have encountered sometimes

15% have never encountered

Have you encountered insulting or offensive terms about men or women being used in your current or previous workplaces?

6% have encountered often

49% have encountered sometimes

28% have never encountered

Who are the offenders?

80% said patients

17% said a co-worker

28% said an owner or manager

14% said senior staff

22% said the family of a patient

9% said a supervisor



# Experiences (continued)

## Patients

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Have patients treated you differently because of your gender?

72% said yes

Do you feel uncomfortable when you have to spend time in a darkened consulting room with patients of another gender?

70% said yes

Does your workplace ensure that you are not alone and can call for assistance if needed, during a patient consultation?

70% said yes

What type of harassing and/or aggressive behavior have you been subjected to, or witnessed during a patient consultation?

33% have experienced verbal abuse, with 4% experiencing it often

29% experiencing it once, and 32% have never experienced it

15% have experienced physical abuse once or sometimes, with 1% experiencing it often

82% have never experienced physical abuse

# Experiences (continued)

## Reporting inappropriate behaviours

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Have you ever reported gender bias, discrimination, harassing and/or aggressive behaviour in their workplace to your manager/supervisor?

24% had

Have you ever reported gender bias, discrimination, harassing and/or aggressive behaviour in their workplace to any authority such as WorkCover or police?

3% had

Does your workplace ensure that you are not alone and can call for assistance if needed, during a patient consultation?

70% said yes

# Bias and role of Optometry Australia

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Participants were asked if they believed there are barriers to progressing with their optometry careers that particularly impact women. Two themes dominated responses.

- a) One theme argued 'no', that there weren't particularly gendered barriers.
- b) The other theme highlighted barriers related to combining parenting roles and optometry, commonly noting that periods of maternity leave, or a preference for part-time work to accommodate parenting responsibilities can detrimentally impact career progression, and highlighting the challenges of finding flexible, part-time roles.

Notably, a small number of comments pointed to broader systemic gender bias in optometry and associated educational/research institutions.

Participants were asked what role they believe Optometry Australia should play in supporting an increasingly feminised optometry profession. Common answers highlighted:

- c) Provision of guidance on appropriate workplace policies.
- d) Promotion of flexible work approaches.
- e) Access to tools and advice on how to deal with bias and inappropriate behaviours, particularly from patients.
- f) Provision of one-on-one support to address these issues.
- g) Provision of CPD outside the hectic evening period for families.

The most common response given was provision of advice on/transparency regarding pay rates by gender.

Notable across comments provided by respondents were those who flagged concerns regarding ageism and racist behaviours in their workplaces, including from patients and colleagues.

If you have experienced, encountered or witnessed gender bias, discrimination, harassing and/or aggressive behaviour in the workplace, Optometry Australia encourages you to talk to your manager or if you prefer, you can obtain complimentary confidential advice from [Industry Legal Group](#), you can contact [Optometry Australia's Optometry Advisor Help Desk](#), you can access up to three coaching and counselling sessions a year via our [Member Assistance Program](#), and you can contact [Lifeline](#) on 13 11 14 or [1800Respect](#) on 1800 737 732.

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