

# Introduction to Sexual Harassment in the Workplace

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In this track, we'll examine

- Definitions of sexual harassment and the linked legal frameworks
- The impacts of sexual harassment on victims
- The broader impact of sexual harassment on a workplace, and
- Strategies and behaviours valuable in combatting sexual harassment

Let's start by considering the definition of sexual harassment, which is "[any kind of unwanted behaviour of a sexual nature that makes you feel humiliated or intimidated, or that creates a hostile environment](#)". The unwanted behaviour can either have "[violated someone's dignity, whether it was intended or not](#)" or "[created an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment for them, whether it was intended or not](#)". As [Rape Crisis](#) outlines, "it can still be sexual harassment even if the other person didn't feel upset, scared, offended, or humiliated" if the intention of the behaviour was to make someone feel this way.

Examples include, but are not limited to, comments of a sexual nature, sexual gestures, touching, sexual advances, kissing, staring or suggestive looks, wolf-whistling, catcalling, sexual contact on social media, intrusive questions about a person's private or sex life, displaying images of a sexual nature, sending emails with sexual content, commenting on someone's body, appearance, or what they're wearing.

As Matteo Winkler, for [Forbes](#), examines, "Damning statistics reveal the degree to which women are subjected to sexual harassment at work, unconfined by geography or a specific industry". [2020 research](#) by the UK Government

Equalities Office found “significantly more women than men have experienced sexual harassment in their lifetime, specifically 84% of women and 60% of men”.

[CIPD research](#) from 2020 shows sexual harassment is still a problem in UK workplaces: 4% of employees said they had been sexually harassed at work over the past three years. [TUC research](#) found “more than half of all women polled have experienced some form of sexual harassment” in the workplace. The [Pew Research Center](#)’s research in the US shows that “59% of women and 27% of men say they have personally received unwanted sexual advances or verbal or physical harassment of a sexual nature, whether in or outside of a work context”.

It must be noted that statistics vary as coming forward as a victim is extremely difficult. Even if workplace structures are seemingly supportive, there may be an embedded culture of not believing women or colleagues having negative attitudes towards individuals who make disclosures. Kim Elsesser, for [Forbes](#), explores how many organisations focus on keeping claims of sexual harassment quiet rather than addressing the root causes. We’ll discuss this more later.

Crucially, subjective definitions of sexual harassment might differ from person to person, so people may respond differently depending on how a question about sexual harassment is asked. This could explain why estimates of sexual harassment rates vary so much. The question “have you ever been sexually harassed at work?” may generate different results to “have you ever been touched by a colleague when you didn’t want to be touched?” or “has anyone at work ever commented on your body in a way that made you feel upset?” or “has anyone asked you a question about your private life that you felt was intrusive?”.

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In terms of a legal framework, in the UK, The Equality Act 2010 protects employees from sexual harassment at work. As [CIPD](#) frames it, “Organisations should treat any form of alleged harassment seriously, not just because of the legal implications and because it can lead to underperformance, but also because people have the right to be treated with dignity and respect at work”. But regulation alone doesn’t eradicate sexual harassment or discrimination. Cultural changes are needed within workplaces alongside the effective application of existing laws. [Matteo Winkler](#)’s cogent phrase is, “prevention of sexual harassment is more a matter of culture than a matter of court”. Developments of regulation must be reflected in day-to-day workplace attitudes.

And why exactly is prevention so essential? Simply because the costs of sexual harassment are huge.

Being humiliated and degraded at work can monumentally impact victims' general well-being, self-confidence, mental health, and contributions. If you're fearful at work, your energy might be reserved for finding a place in the office where you can feel safe. It's reserved for hoping nothing degrading happens to you, for being able to find peace. You might not want to participate in meetings for fear of sexualised comments or intimidating comments. You might need to plan your movements and schedule to avoid the person who is sexually harassing you. You're unlikely to be as productive as if you felt comfortable, respected and safe. You might simply not feel able to come to work at all, leading to absenteeism or leaving an organisation altogether.

Sexual harassment inevitably impacts the victim, but how does it feel to work for an organisation that doesn't investigate allegations and dismisses the experiences of victims? Morale is likely to be low. Levels of trust are likely to be limited. Colleagues, in general, might feel fearful of sexual harassment if it's rife and senior managers aren't addressing it. Employees may also wonder if there are other harmful practices their managers overlook.

According to [Matteo Winkler](#), more than one-third of victims still keep an incident of sexual harassment to themselves. He labels victims' unwillingness to talk about harassment as "a code of silence" because of how widespread it is. Information can be withheld if it's not safe to share. Victims might be discouraged from speaking up. [TUC research](#) found "four out of five women did not report the sexual harassment to their employer". Individuals self-censor if they know they will not be listened to or believed. There has to be a reason for victims to speak. Being disbelieved, undermined, or blamed are all reasons to stay silent.

If it's known in a workplace that disclosures won't be kept confidential, say, then victims are unlikely to feel comfortable coming forward. If there are going to be negative repercussions to a woman's career, she must weigh up the repercussions of reporting sexual harassment.

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So, if you're a leader in your organisation, how can you make it clear to all employees what your organisation's stance on sexual harassment is? As part of all onboarding processes, managers should talk individuals through exactly how they report harassment. Erin ImHof of Circadence [advocates](#) for managers to have "a set of procedures in place to guide staff members who want to file a complaint. This may also include an HR employee hotline. Follow through with complaints. Listen to the employee, take them seriously and document the conversation".

And if reports are made, properly investigate them within formal frameworks. Some managers incorrectly think that if they're not hearing about sexual harassment, then it must not be happening. In reality, an absence of disclosures just means it's happening without the organisation's knowledge. Lily Zheng, for [HBR](#), talks about the need for 'psychological safety' within organisations, which is the concept of feeling empowered to make disclosures and provide feedback. Nicole Fernandes of Blu Ivy Group [says](#), "Often sexual harassment goes unnoticed or unreported because people fear reprisal or inaction. One of the biggest ways to remedy this is to focus on cultivating trust within your organization, and a "speak up" culture where there are multiple forums for two-way feedback. When this exists, people learn that their voice matters and are more likely to advocate for themselves or others."

A lack of individuals coming forward may actually mean that employees fundamentally don't trust their employer's processes and assume they'll be treated inappropriately in response. Evidence shows that there is fear around the impact making a disclosure might have on an individual's life.

As an example, [Kim Elsesser](#) outlines the experience of Lisa Bowman:

*She was the chief marketing officer at United Way Worldwide when she filed a formal sexual harassment complaint with the organization. Months after she brought the allegations, in January 2020, she was fired by the company's CEO Brian Gallagher[...] Having a stellar employment record at the company, Bowman believes she was fired simply because she spoke up about the harassment. According to Bowman, the harasser was not sanctioned, punished or, to her knowledge, even advised about his behavior.*

This is an experience echoed by other women in other organisations. Some report that making an allegation in one company even impacts their prospects in another. Bowman speaks about victims of sexual harassment often being seen as the problem rather than the perpetrators who are responsible for the harm. Victims may be seen as being "too vocal" or "too disruptive" rather than being appreciated for making the very difficult decision to come forward and shed light on an incredibly important issue. In fact, as Lily Zheng [highlights](#), when issues aren't addressed, problems can build up, and the eventual outcome is worse than it ever would have been for both victims and the organisation as a whole. They liken this to 'shaking a can of soda'. The more the problem is kept hidden, the more its impacts build in secret.

In order to raise awareness and embed a culture of support within an organisation, Rohini Shanka of CIOX Health [promotes](#) organisations creating

“education and training, specifically, for the role of the bystander. It’s really critical for leaders to create organizational norms of what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Anyone can step up and help or escalate the concern. It should not have to be the job of the person who is a victim.” As with any instance of discrimination, allyship is incredibly important, and the burden of highlighting an issue shouldn’t rest on the shoulders of the person who has been harmed. Anyone can be an advocate and speak up for change in a safe and inclusive workplace. Plus, the more sexual harassment is discussed and a zero-tolerance approach is reinforced, it sends a clear message to perpetrators that their behaviour is entirely unacceptable and they will face appropriate repercussions. The more people who become confident with knowing the definitions of sexual harassment, the more people there are to call out harmful behaviours. This results in a safer workplace overall.

So we’ve examined the definitions of sexual harassment and the related statistics and seen the impacts on victims. We’ve seen the impact sexual harassment has on individuals and the workplace as a whole. We’ve looked at the importance of clear and appropriate procedures and frameworks. Finally, we’ve explored the ways in which a workplace can be made safer.

This week, seek out your own organisation’s policies on sexual harassment. Think of some actions or behaviours that you might have observed in your previous workplaces. Consider your role as a bystander and list three things you could have done in that situation.

That’s all for now. Have a productive day.

