

Sexual Harrassment

me too

“If your flirting strategy is indistinguishable from harassment, it’s not everyone else that’s the problem.”

John Scalzi

“Sometimes when women come forward about sexual harassment, they’re seen as a troublemaker”

Gretchen Carlson

Introduction

Recent high-profile cases of sexual harassment have caused a ripple effect throughout workplaces and wider communities.

The media and social media campaigns such as #MeToo, in which people from diverse backgrounds all over the world disclosed their own experiences of sexual harassment, have shone a light on just how prevalent sexual harassment is in our culture today.

A recent ComRes survey for BBC News shows that 40% of women and 18% of men have experienced harassment in the workplace, and highlights that flexible workers are more likely to have experienced unwanted behaviour. Following reports from the film industry and government departments we are now starting to see disclosures from the hospitality industry, as hidden, unspoken and buried memories of abusive incidents are triggered by revelations that are currently making headlines.

What is sexual harassment?

The Equalities Act (2010) defines sexual harassment as; “unwanted conduct of a sexual nature which has the purpose or effect of violating someone’s dignity or creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment for them.”

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What is sexual harassment? ...continued

Experiencing this in the workplace can then, by definition, feel violating, hostile, degrading, humiliating and offensive. There are no circumstances wherein sexual harassment of any nature is acceptable.

Many different behaviours are considered as sexual harassment including suggestive or indecent language and remarks, unwanted physical contact, requests or demands for sexual acts and the sharing or displaying of pornographic material.

Who might be a target?

Anybody can be the subject of sexual harassment regardless of their gender or sexual orientation. Although many of the stories circulating in the press involve women, men can be targeted too. In the workplace the target is often a person with a lower power status.

The Equal Opportunities Commission (2002) reported that the majority of harassment cases which reached tribunal were brought by those who had been in the workplace for less than a year.

The victims are not inherently powerless but they are operating within a system in which the stakes are high if their grievance is not handled well.

How does it differ from sexual assault?

The Metropolitan Police define sexual or indecent assault as 'an act of physical, psychological and emotional violation in the form of a sexual act, inflicted on someone without their consent. It can involve forcing or manipulating someone to witness or participate in any sexual acts.'

Sexual assault does not always involve violence, physical injury or leave visible marks but this does not in any way lessen the distress and emotional harm which can result.

What prevents people from speaking out?

A lot of discussion in the press and in social media has centred around why people have not come forward and there are a number of reasons for this.

Cultural context - One of the problems is that unwanted sexual behaviour has been normalised. For instance sexual innuendo and banter are commonplace and tolerated, dismissed as harmless 'boys talk'.

Those who object can be labelled as unable to take a joke, too politically correct or not tough enough to hang out with the 'boys'. Instead they are the ones perceived to be the problem. In patriarchal workforces this can be particularly challenging as women feel the pressure to fit in if they wish to succeed.

The balance of power - Harassment often occurs when there is a clear power differential. As we have seen in Hollywood it has typically been the young emerging actor who is exploited by the powerful director or producer. They found themselves operating within a system which protected the perpetrator, and to speak out could risk their entire career.

The powerful would manoeuvre them into vulnerable situations e.g. meetings in hotel rooms. In other spheres any employee who is dependant on their income may feel it is unsafe to speak out until they have secured another position, and even then there is the risk that it may affect their chances of being hired again.

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What prevents people from speaking out?...continued

Lack of confidence they will be taken seriously -

Historically the outcomes for reporting sexual harassment have been poor, a TUC report found that in 80% of cases nothing changed and many fear that reporting issues could make things worse.

The shame of feeling violated can make an individual feel as though it is their fault, and this is not helped by blaming statements like 'she was asking for it dressed that way.' When someone is feeling vulnerable they need comfort and

understanding rather than judgement, it can feel very private for them.

Emotional impact - Sexual harassment is a violation and can result in feelings of fear, humiliation and shame. Such difficult feelings take time and courage to face up to and process.

What can you do?

Share your experiences – Talk first to someone you can trust and speak to in confidence. This does not have to be someone in your organisation if the harassment has occurred at work. Speaking about sexual harassment is a good first step to exploring what your options are for action. Doing this in secret or isolation is much harder and support can be very useful during this time. If your organisation has an EAP this is a good, confidential place to start.

Understand who is at fault – If you are experiencing harassment of this kind, it is not your fault. It is often an aspect of sexual harassment that the victim is made to feel at blame for the actions of the perpetrator(s). This is often the reason for these behaviours going unreported. Taking action to highlight the harassment is an important step towards recovering.

Keep records – Whenever and wherever you come across sexual harassment it is useful to have a written record made as close to the event as possible. A note written in your phone is often all that is required. Make a simple record of what happened, where, when and by whom. This way you can focus on looking after yourself in the aftermath rather than on trying to recall the events

Explore your options – If you wish to report the harassment it is useful to first investigate what the systems in place in your organisation are. This could be; line management, senior management, HR, a whistleblowing line etc.

Only speak out when ready – Take care to consider your own wellbeing when reporting such incidents officially. Making sure you have the personal support in place before doing so can make your experience of the official reporting procedures more comfortable.

If you feel it would help, consider asking a friend or trusted colleague to accompany you to any meeting and/or check written communications around this harassment.

Speak directly – For instances of a single incident it may be possible to speak directly with the person displaying the harassing behaviour. It may be that their perception of what is harassment is different from yours.

Describe the behaviour, its effects on you and say that you want it to stop. If you don't feel comfortable speaking to them in person you could write and email, or ask a friend or colleague to accompany you and be a witness.



Ongoing support

Speaking to a professional trained in recognising the symptoms of stress and trauma is a useful action to take.

Even if it is just a brief telephone call to our confidential Assistance Line you will have a chance to focus on yourself and the effects of the experience on

you rather than the practical side of combating the sexual harassment.

Symptoms can arise weeks, months or even years after the event so try to check in regularly to ensure that you are getting the correct support in order to recover.

Finally

Although the recent accounts of sexual harassment have been disturbing they also bring with them some hope.

They have raised awareness and understanding around the complex and sensitive nature of sexual harassment, perpetrators are being held to account, and there is a growing sense of solidarity amongst those who have been targets of such unwanted behaviour.

This paves the way for others to get the support and understanding that they need and for unwanted behaviour to be called out.

If there is anything raised in this help sheet that you would like to discuss further, and in confidence, our Assistance Line is available 24/7 on 0808 802 0282.



Further help and information

Hospitality Action – Helping our people in the Hospitality industry

www.hospitalityaction.org.uk

Helpline 0808 802 0282

24-hour Assistance Line, providing emotional and practical support.

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