



## EMPOWERING YOURSELF TO DEAL WITH SEXUAL HARASSMENT

This article will discuss how to recognise early stages of sexual harassment and ensure that it doesn't escalate.

**At the outset however, we need to state that you have the right to dignity in the workplace and to conduct yourself as you wish in the workplace, respecting the norms of the workplace, respecting the rights of your colleagues to their dignity and respecting the right of management to determine organisational policies. So, for example, no-one has the right to determine how you should dress and present yourself, as long as you do so professionally and appropriately and within safety and health requirements. If your organisation has a dress code, you should comply with it or raise concerns about it through the appropriate channels. If the organisation has a policy on workplace relationships, again, you should comply with it or raise concerns through appropriate channels. You alone have the right to determine what is acceptable to you in interpersonal verbal and non-verbal interactions – if you dislike being touched, you need to make this clear; if you dislike certain types of jokes, you need to make that clear without being offensive.**

The first few steps below are like making sure you know where the emergency exit is in a cinema or on an airplane – you hope you will never need to know, but just in case:

1. Make sure you know your organisation's Sexual Harassment Policy. If there isn't one, raise the matter with the appropriate manager, the Employment Equity Committee or your union representative.
2. Make sure you know and comply with your organisation's workplace relationship policy. This will help to protect you should a sexual harassment problem arise later and you are accused of making a malicious complaint.
3. Make sure you know who to go to if you have a problem. This might be your union representative; your Employee Assistance Programme; your HR department; your organisation may have a designated Safe Person/Champion.

Then, a good degree of self-awareness helps. This is because we all have 'buttons' which are sensitive spots which, if pressed, can make us feel so bad that we react emotionally and sometimes inappropriately. One of the difficulties in sexual harassment incidents is that two continuums, as shown below, interact and the combination possibilities are many and can be complicated.

There is the continuum of sexual harassment behaviour by the perpetrator, which could range from:

---

Mild (silly jokes, flirty behaviour)

A wide range of verbal and non-verbal behaviours

Extreme (physical assault, rape, social media trolling)

Then there is another continuum which has to do with who you are and what has happened to you in your life:

---

Highly vulnerable – possibly abused earlier in life; low self-esteem; fearful of power; have been very protected and never learned to defend myself

I can handle quite a lot, but some things are beyond acceptable and I'm not sure how to stop it

“Tough” – such things really don't bother me, I can laugh them off; tell him/her directly to stop it

So, if you are vulnerable, and exposed to mild sexual harassment, this can feel much worse than if you are someone who is 'tough' and exposed to extreme sexual harassment and knows how to take steps to stop it happening. The Sexual Harassment Policy should take account of this, and the legal position is that it is the impact on you which determines whether harassment occurred.

So the next few steps are designed to achieve the outcome which is going to work best for everyone concerned, and that is:

- that the behaviour is 'called out' as soon as possible;
- the perpetrator realises it is wrong and corrects his behaviour; and
- work can carry on as it should.

(Clearly, where the harassment has been extreme, things have moved beyond correction, and disciplinary measures are appropriate.)

1. Recognise the behaviour for what it is – refer to the Sexual Harassment Policy.
2. If you feel able to, inform the perpetrator that his/her conduct is not acceptable to you. You can also indicate that it is unwelcome by moving away, not returning social media messages/phone calls etc.
3. If you are not sure about the situation and/or your reaction to it, find a safe person to talk to about it. If you already have a workplace mentor, or a coach, or someone else such as a counsellor, talk to them about it, they may help you to perceive the situation as it is, and to form an appropriate response.
4. If you think the harasser may repeat the behaviour, inform an appropriate person. You may not wish to lay an official complaint at this point, but it is advisable to get the incident on record in some way.
5. If you think that the perpetrator is 'taking it out on you' for rejecting him/her, try to make a record of what is happening and take it to an official channel as soon as possible. You might need witnesses for this, or people to corroborate your side of the story. Evidence that might be helpful would be to show a difference of how he/she is treating you after the rejection to treatment before.

Try not to 'escalate' the conflict by telling everyone around you, that involves others which might cause problems for you or the perpetrator in future. By all means talk to people close to you who you can trust to keep calm and help you deal with it. The organisation is obliged to keep the matter confidential if you report it, so try to keep it as confidential as possible from your side.

If you think you have seen the perpetrator do the same thing to someone else, you could talk to that person and encourage him/her to come with you to make a complaint.

7. If you are laying an official complaint, make sure you are offered both informal and formal ways to deal with the complaint, and listen to the counselling as to which would be more appropriate in your circumstances. The decision is yours, however, and whichever route you choose, you have not given up any rights to take your complaint further if you are not satisfied with the outcome.
8. If, unfortunately, you have been the victim of sexual harassment, make sure you go for counselling, part of which is to deal with what happened to you, and part of which should aim to help you cope with any future difficult situations.

If any of your colleagues come to you upset by sexual harassment of any form, help them along the lines set out above. If you see something, say something.

Watch some TED talks on sexual harassment, they are very empowering.

1. How to end sexual harassment at work – Gretchen Carlson  
[https://www.ted.com/talks/gretchen\\_carlson\\_how\\_we\\_can\\_end\\_sexual\\_harassment\\_at\\_work](https://www.ted.com/talks/gretchen_carlson_how_we_can_end_sexual_harassment_at_work)
2. Why women stay silent  
[https://www.ted.com/talks/ines\\_hercovich\\_why\\_women\\_stay\\_silent\\_after\\_sexual\\_assault#t-84980](https://www.ted.com/talks/ines_hercovich_why_women_stay_silent_after_sexual_assault#t-84980)
3. The danger of hiding who you are  
[https://www.ted.com/talks/morgana\\_bailey\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_hiding\\_who\\_you\\_are](https://www.ted.com/talks/morgana_bailey_the_danger_of_hiding_who_you_are)