

SEXUAL HARASSMENT AT THE WORKPLACE

Sexual harassment is a form of sex discrimination and can be defined as 'unwelcome verbal, visual, or physical conduct of a sexual nature that is severe and affects working conditions or creates a hostile work environment.' Many different kinds of behaviour—verbal, visual or physical—that are of a sexual nature may be sexual harassment.

Although a single unwanted request for a date or one sexually suggestive comment might offend you and/or be inappropriate, it may not be sexual harassment. However, a number of relatively minor separate incidents may add up to sexual harassment if the incidents affect your work environment. If you are fired, refused a promotion, demoted, given a poor performance evaluation, or reassigned to a less desirable position because you reject a sexual advance, that is certainly sexual harassment.

When you are deciding what to do, remember that every situation is different. There is no one best thing to do. You should always report the sexual harassment to your employer. You then have the option to use your company's sexual harassment complaint process or file an official complaint with, for instance the labour commission.

Examples of sexual harassment may be:

Verbal or written: Comments about clothing, personal behaviour, or a person's body; sexual or sex-based jokes; requesting sexual favours or repeatedly asking a person out; sexual innuendoes; telling rumours about a person's personal or sexual life; threatening a person

Physical: Assault, blocking movement; inappropriate touching of a person or a person's clothing; kissing, hugging, patting, stroking

Nonverbal: Looking up and down a person's body, derogatory gestures or facial expressions of a sexual nature; following a person

Visual: Posters, drawings, pictures, screensavers or emails of a sexual nature.

Below are some suggestions on how to deal with sexual harassment at the workplace:

Say "No" Clearly: Tell the person that his/her behaviour offends you. If the harassment doesn't end immediately, write a letter asking the harasser to stop and **keep a copy**.

Write Down What Happened: As soon as you experience the sexual harassment, start writing it down. Write down dates, places, times, and possible witnesses to what happened. If possible, ask your co-workers to write down what they saw or heard, especially if the same thing is happening to them. Remember that others may (and probably will) read this written record at some point. It is a good idea to keep the record at home or in some other safe place. Do not keep the record at work.

Report the Harassment: Tell your supervisor, your human resources department or some other department or person within your organization who has the power to stop the harassment. If possible, tell them in writing. Keep a copy of any written complaint you make to your employer. It is very important that you report the harassment because your employer must know or have reason to know about the harassment in order to be legally responsible for a co-worker, client or customer's

actions. Even if your harasser was your supervisor, you may need to show that you reported the harassment to your employer or give a good reason why you didn't.

Start a Paper Trail: When you report the sexual harassment to your employer, do it in writing. Describe the problem and how you want it fixed. This creates a written record of when you complained and what happened in response to it. Keep copies of everything you send and receive from your employer.

Use the Grievance Procedure at Work: Many employers have policies for dealing with sexual harassment complaints. You may be able to resolve the problem through this process. To find out your employer's policies, look in your employee manual/personnel policies and/or speak to a human resources officer. It is important to follow your employer's procedures.

File a Discrimination Complaint with a government agency: If you want to, file a complaint with the labour commissioner's office in your region.

With information from www.equalrights.org