

Dealing with sexism at work

'I know how you got here'

'Oh! I thought you were a nurse'

'Look at those legs'

How often the patient or colleagues have to be reminded that you are the senior medical professional and your male colleague is a learner?

Comments female professionals would have heard at least once in their careers.

What sexual harassment is

Sexual harassment is unwanted behaviour of a sexual nature. The law (Equality Act 2010) protects the following people against sexual harassment at work:

- employees and workers
- contractors and self-employed people hired to personally do the work
- job applicants

To be sexual harassment, the unwanted behaviour must have either:

- violated someone's dignity
- created an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment for someone

It can be sexual harassment if the behaviour:

- has one of these effects even if it was not intended
- intended to have one of these effects even if it did not have that effect

All complaints of sexual harassment will be taken seriously.

Employers should handle any investigation in a way that's fair and sensitive to:

- the person who made the complaint
- someone who witnessed it
- someone who's been accused of sexual harassment

Who can experience sexual harassment

Sexual harassment can happen to men, women and people of any gender identity or sexual orientation. It can be carried out by anyone of the same sex, a different sex or anyone of any gender identity.

You could experience sexual harassment from anyone you come into contact with because of your job, including:

- someone you work with
- a manager, supervisor or someone else in a position of authority
- someone high profile or influential

You can also experience sexual harassment from a customer, client or member of the public. An employer should take steps to prevent this.

Examples of sexual harassment

Sexual harassment can be a one-off incident or an ongoing pattern of behaviour.

It can happen in person or in other ways, for example online through things like email, social media or messaging tools.

Examples include:

- making sexual remarks about someone's body, clothing or appearance
- asking questions about someone's sex life
- telling sexually offensive jokes/spreading sexual rumours about a person
- making sexual comments or jokes about someone's sexual orientation or gender reassignment
- displaying or sharing pornographic or sexual images, or other sexual content
- unwelcome touching, hugging, massaging or kissing
- making promises in return for sexual favours
- sexual assault or rape

What can you do if you have experienced or witnessed sexual harassment?

- Document: It's a good idea to make a note of what's happened. This should include dates, times and names, including any witnesses. Making a note can be especially helpful if you find talking about the experience particularly distressing.
- Get advice: from a colleague at work or trade union representative
- Raise your concern: to your colleague or senior or through the raising concerns part of this website.
- Make a formal complaint if there has been no resolution or you are not heard.

There is a new sexual harassment law which will be changing on 26/10/2024. By law, all employers will need to take steps to prevent sexual harassment.

Further resources:

<https://www.gmc-uk.org/professional-standards/ethical-hub/identifying-and-tackling-sexual-misconduct#Sexual%20behaviour%20between%20colleagues%20and%20students>

<https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/guidance/sexual-harassment-and-harassment-work-technical-guidance>

<https://www.acas.org.uk/sexual-harassment/steps-for-employers-to-prevent-sexual-harassment>

<https://www.bma.org.uk/advice-and-support/equality-and-diversity-guidance/gender-equality-in-medicine/sexism-in-medicine-report>