Sexual harassment



Over half of women have experienced sexual harassment at work. Two thirds of LGBT+ people have experienced it, and Black workers, disabled workers and young workers also report higher rates of harassment. Isn't it time we did something about it?

UNISON believes that everyone should be treated with dignity and respect. Your employer should make clear that sexual harassment of any kind is totally unacceptable and will never be tolerated in your workplace.

unison.org.uk/women

UNISON
the public service union

What is sexual harassment?

Sexual harassment is illegal. It's not just a joke or banter or flirting – if it causes offence then it's sexual harassment, whether or not the person says they meant to cause it.

The Equality Act 2010 (or the Sex Discrimination (Northern Ireland) Order 1976 as amended, in Northern Ireland) defines sexual harassment as unwanted conduct of a sexual nature that creates an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive working environment.

It includes verbal, non-verbal or physical things like:

- leering or suggestive gestures, remarks or jokes
- questions or suggestions about your sex life or a colleague's sex life
- the invasion of personal space and unwelcome touching, hugging or kissing
- the display or circulation of offensive material, like pornography
- unwelcome sexual advances and demands for sexual favours
- unwanted or derogatory comments or nicknames about clothing or appearance
- 'upskirting' that typically involves someone taking a picture under another person's clothing without their knowledge
- comments of a sexual nature about sexual orientation or gender identity

The harasser might be a colleague, a supervisor, a manager, a client, a patient, a contractor, or a member of the public. It can happen in a range of places, including your normal workplace or somewhere you visit for work, at a work social event, or via email, phone, or social media.

Under the law, employees are able to complain of behaviour that they find offensive even if it isn't directed at them. That means if you see or overhear sexual harassment taking place, or someone's actions create a hostile or degrading working environment, you can report it.

What should you do if you are being sexually harassed?

- Speak to a trusted friend or family member.
- Speak to your UNISON rep and let them know what's happened, however big or small it might seem. If you aren't sure how to contact your rep, call UNISONdirect on 0800 0 857857 and we will put you in touch.
- Keep a record of what has happened to you, including time, date, location and any witnesses. Also keep evidence like letters, text messages and e-mails, as well as details of any medical help sought.
- If you feel safe to do so, tell the harasser to stop. You could ask them in writing and your UNISON rep should be able to support you to do that. Keep a record of any steps you have taken and any response from the harasser.
- Speak to your line manager or, if they are the harasser, to a more senior manager or the HR department.
- If the problem is not resolved, make a formal complaint using your workplace grievance procedure or the reporting procedure within your workplace anti-harassment policy (if there is one). Your UNISON rep should be able to support you.
- If the issue is still not resolved, you may be able to take it to an employment tribunal. Your UNISON rep should be able to support you.
- You can also contact UNISON's own welfare charity There for You on 020 7121 5620, email **thereforyou@unison.co.uk**, or speak to your branch welfare officer.
- If you are concerned for your own or someone else's immediate safety, ring the police on 999. Call 101 to contact the police if the crime is not an emergency.

How is UNISON tackling sexual harassment?

UNISON recognises the serious nature of sexual harassment at work and the devastating impact it can have on individuals. As well as making you feel uncomfortable or threatened, it can lead to ill health and work-related stress that can affect not only your working life but your personal life too.

UNISON is here for you. Your rep and your branch will listen to you, take your reports seriously and treat the matter in confidence. We'll advise you about your rights under the law and what next steps you could take, whether you decide you want to report the harassment or not. Most of all, we'll make sure that you feel supported and in control.

In workplaces, we negotiate with employers to secure a meaningful sexual harassment policy and build a safe and respectful working environment for everyone.

UNISON knows that prevention is key and the first priority in dealing with sexual harassment for trade unions is to eliminate it from the workplace.

As the UK's biggest trade union and women's organisation, we work to improve gender equality and challenge sexism within all areas of public services. Get involved in a range of other UNISON campaigns on issues that particularly affect women, including menopause and the gender pay gap. Find out more at **unison.org.uk/women**.

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