

New report on sexual harassment in the workplace

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A new report on sexual harassment in the workplace has shown the continued prevalence of such behaviour, even when employees work from home. In this briefing we highlight the key findings of the report and outline the recommended steps for employers.

Since Alyssa Milano's tweet back in 2017, the #MeToo movement has propelled the global campaign to tackle systemic issues of sexual harassment, especially within the workplace.

Off the back of the #MeToo movement, the Fawcett Society (together with other organisations) has continued the campaign. Indeed, it has succeeded in achieving a commitment from the Government to introduce legislation which places a duty on employers to prevent sexual harassment in the workplace. Whilst legislation can protect victims and penalise perpetrators, the Fawcett Society believes that more needs to be done to change the root causes of sexual harassment – a cultural change needs to happen. The “banter” needs to be called out.

In response, the Fawcett Society has published a report, *Tackling Sexual Harassment in the Workplace*, which is based on evidence from women who have experienced sexual harassment in the workplace and a survey of managers who have dealt with reports of sexual harassment.

What does the report show?

The key findings of the report show that:

- At least 40% of women had experienced harassment in the workplace. This increased for women who are marginalised for other reasons (e.g. race, class, disability).
- 45% of women surveyed reported having experienced harassment online through sexual messages, cyber

harassment and sexual calls – these experiences escalated whilst working from home in the pandemic (which is consistent with the increase in reports of domestic violence during the lockdown).

- 68% of disabled women reported being sexually harassed at work, compared to 52% of women in general.
- Workers from ethnic minority backgrounds (women and men) reported higher rates of sexual harassment than white workers (38% compared with 28%).
- 68% of LGBT workers had experienced some form of harassment in the workplace.

Given that hybrid working continues to be the norm for many, the finding that harassment increased when working from home will be of concern to employers.

Broadly, the report found that women often felt that they could not report harassment in the workplace, due to fears that complaints would not be treated seriously and that investigations would not be conducted confidentially.

Interestingly, the report also focused on managers, who are often caught in the middle of delicate and difficult complaints with little training, support or assistance to guide them through the process.

These factors have resulted in a deep-rooted culture whereby some employers seek to resolve incidents of sexual harassment quietly in order to minimise liability, and where workers fear victimisation for speaking out.

It is for this reason that the Fawcett Society is calling for a cultural shift from “an individualised approach of an institutional problem” and has identified five key elements to eliminating sexual harassment in the work place, namely: culture, policy, training, reporting mechanisms and the way an employer responds to reports.

What can employers do to eradicate organisational cultures and

norms which result in harassment?

The report recommends that employers:

- Take all forms of sexual harassment seriously – this includes seemingly innocent “banter”.
- Ensure that all employees who report sexual harassment are treated with respect and empathy and that victims feel comfortable reporting harassment (for example through anonymous reporting).
- Increase gender equality within the organisation, particularly at senior levels.
- Demonstrate a commitment to tackling harassment through strong leadership.
- Conduct employee surveys to measure organisational attitudes towards sexual harassment.
- Provide training to managers so that they feel equipped to deal with harassment complaints.
- Produce a detailed sexual harassment policy, separate to a general harassment and bullying policy.

This report, and the Government’s commitment to legislate, could be viewed as yet another burden laid at the door of employers. However, it is important to recognise that if employers want to create diverse and productive environments for their employees, which will improve employee retention and engagement, then there is certainly an excellent business case for tackling this problem.

[Tackling Sexual Harassment in the Workplace](#)

If you would like to discuss how your organisation can tackle the issue of harassment in the workplace, please contact Emily Plosker (emilyplosker@bdbf.co.uk), Amanda Steadman (amandasteadman@bdbf.co.uk) or your usual BDBF contact.

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