



NSVRC TIP SHEET

Ending Sexual Assault and Harassment in the Workplace

As the #MeToo movement has made indisputably clear, sexual assault and harassment are widespread societal problems that impact Americans across race, gender identity, sexual orientation, income, disability status, and many other factors. Recent news coverage and research have demonstrated both the scope and impact of workplace sexual harassment. This tip sheet includes information about defining workplace sexual harassment, the size of the problem, and the path to prevention.

WHAT IS SEXUAL HARASSMENT?

Sexual harassment is defined by its impact, not its intent. It can include behavior such as unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical harassment of a sexual nature. It can also include inappropriate statements; lewd gestures; leering behavior; sexually explicit jokes, emails, or texts; and offensive objects or images.

Anyone of any sex, sexual orientation, or gender identity can be a victim or a harasser. The victim and the harasser can also be of the same sex, sexual orientation, and/or gender identity.

FACTS AND FIGURES

- Eighty-one percent of women and 43 percent of men report experiencing some form of sexual harassment and/or assault in their lifetime (Kearl, 2018).
- More than three in four women (77 percent) and one in three men (34 percent) say they have experienced verbal sexual harassment (Kearl, 2018).
- One in two women (51 percent) and one in six men (17 percent) say they have been sexually touched in an unwelcome way (Kearl, 2018).
- Sixty percent of women say they have experienced unwanted sexual attention or sexual coercion, OR sexually crude conduct or sexist comments in the workplace (Feldblum & Lipnic, 2016).
- In some industries, more than nine in 10 women say they have been sexually harassed (Puente & Kelly, 2018).
- Upwards of 85 percent of people who experience sexual harassment never file a formal legal charge, and approximately 70 percent of employees never even complain internally (Feldblum & Lipnic, 2016).

PREVENTING WORKPLACE SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Workplace sexual harassment is one of the most widespread and pervasive problems in U.S. society. But prevention is possible, and it's happening. Through using research and best practices, we can create a healthier workplace culture, one in which no employee is forced to deal with the trauma caused by sexual harassment and where the work environment promotes the safety and well-being of all employees.

The following findings from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) [Select Task Force on the Study of Harassment in the Workplace](#) demonstrate the steps necessary for employers to move toward prevention.

- 1. Identify conditions that place employees at risk.** Workplace sexual harassment can impact employees no matter where they work. However, certain environmental or organizational conditions can increase the likelihood of harassment. These characteristics do not in and of themselves cause harassment, but employers have a responsibility to assess these risk factors and take action to mitigate risks in the environment. Risk factors identified by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission cite the following: lack of diversity in the workplace, workforces with young employees, isolated workspaces, cultural and language differences in the workplace, workplaces that rely on customer service or client satisfaction, workplace cultures that tolerate or encourage alcohol consumption, or workplaces with significant power disparities (Feldblum & Lipnic, 2016).
- 2. Maintain a clear and comprehensive anti-harassment policy.** The most basic starting point for all employers is to have a stated policy against harassment that sets forth the behaviors that will not be accepted in the workplace and the procedures to follow in reporting and responding to harassment. This should include frequent communication to employees regarding how to report experienced harassment, as well as observed harassment. It should require workplace investigations be prompt, objective, and thorough. Lastly, disciplinary action for harassment must be proportionate to the offense. "Zero-tolerance" policies may convey a one-size-fits-all policy that could backfire if victims decline to report out of concern that colleagues will lose their jobs (Feldblum & Lipnic, 2016).
- 3. Implement training that works.** Too often, sexual harassment training is irrelevant, out-of-date, or brushed aside. Training programs should be tailored to the specific contexts of each workplace using realistic examples and scenarios. Focus on the spectrum of unacceptable behavior, not just the standards where behavior becomes legally actionable. Employees should also know their rights and responsibilities if they experience behaviors that violate anti-harassment policies (Feldblum & Lipnic, 2016).
- 4. Promote a culture of respect and inclusion.** Employers should foster an organizational culture in which harassment is not tolerated, and in which respect and civility are promoted, and they should communicate and model a consistent commitment to that goal. Successful initiatives such as [It's On Us](#) point the way for how we can change the way people think about sexual harassment, moving from a focus on targets, harassers, and legal compliance to one where all employees, regardless of position, feel empowered to change their workplace culture (Feldblum & Lipnic, 2016).
- 5. Change requires leadership and accountability.** A commitment to an inclusive and respectful workplace is not in and of itself enough. Leadership must ensure accountability mechanisms are in place throughout the organization to hold employees responsible for their actions. There is a

clear business case to be made for preventing sexual harassment. Employers must not only take into account the direct financial costs associated with sexual harassment including legal action, but the productivity, well-being and job satisfaction of all employees is threatened by demoralizing atmosphere created when staff experience and witness it. It's time for employers to recognize that and act accordingly, making the changes necessary to stamp out sexual harassment once and for all (Feldblum & Lipnic, 2016).

LEARN MORE

Read a summary of the key findings of the Select Task Force on the Study of Harassment in the Workplace report published by NSVRC.

Key findings of the select task force on the study of harassment in the workplace:

<https://www.nsvrc.org/key-findings-select-task-force-study-harassment-workplace>

REFERENCES

Feldblum, C. R., & Lipnic, V. A. (2016). Select Task Force on the Study of Harassment in the Workplace: Report of the Co-Chairs of the EEOC. Retrieved from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission: https://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/task_force/harassment/upload/report.pdf

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Puente, M. & Kelly, C. (2018, February 20). The 94 percent: How common is sexual misconduct in Hollywood? USA Today. Retrieved from <https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/people/2018/02/20/how-common-sexual-misconduct-hollywood/1083964001/>

ABOUT NSVRC

The National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC) is the leading nonprofit in providing information and tools to prevent and respond to sexual violence. NSVRC translates research and trends into best practices that help individuals, communities and service providers achieve real and lasting change. The center also works with the media to promote informed reporting. Every April, NSVRC leads Sexual Assault Awareness Month (SAAM), a campaign to educate and engage the public in addressing this widespread issue. NSVRC is also one of the three founding organizations of Raliance, a national, collaborative initiative dedicated to ending sexual violence in one generation. The organization was chartered in 2000 by the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape through a cooperative agreement with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.