

Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment is the most common form of sexual violence. Surveys show that roughly 70% of women and 15% of men have experienced sexual harassment in the workplace.¹ This number does not include sexual harassment that occurs in other environments, such as learning institutions or social situations. Like all sexual violence, sexual harassment is a show of power. This show of power is meant to make the person being harassed afraid and accepting of the sexual harassment.² Sexual harassment happens to people of all genders. **It is important to remember that sexual harassment is not primarily a gender issue, but a power issue.** It is a violation of an individual's human rights.

What is Sexual Harassment? Sexual harassment is any unwanted sexual attention or communication that is offensive, intimidating, or humiliating, whether in verbal, written, or visual form. The Alberta Human Rights Commission defines sexual harassment as “any unwelcome behaviour, sexual in nature that adversely affects, or threatens to affect, directly or indirectly, a person’s job [or academic] security, working conditions or prospects for promotion, advancement or earnings; or prevents a person from getting a job, living accommodations or any other kind of public service”.³ Offensive and demeaning behaviours do not have to be tangibly detrimental (i.e., Wage loss, passed promotions, etc) to be considered sexual harassment.

Types of Sexual Harassment:

- **Quid Pro Quo**

The first type of sexual harassment referred to as quid pro quo or “this for that” is the easiest type of harassment to identify. The harasser attempts to use power to get the individual to agree to sexual favours. “This for that” sexual harassment involves either implied or expressed promises of a reward for complying with sexual advances or implied or explicit threats or reprisal for failure to comply with the harasser’s sexual demands. Although this type of sexual harassment is often easy to identify, it is usually under-reported. This may be because the person being harassed fears retaliation, that they won’t be believed, or that they will be blamed for the harassment.

- **Poisoned Environment**

The second type of sexual harassment is referred to as poisoned environment sexual harassment because it creates an environment where people feel uneasy. It is much harder to identify because of its many forms, yet it is very prevalent. It usually involves persistent, repeated behaviours such as crude or offensive jokes, sexual comments, displays of offensive material, outright demands for sexual favours, unwanted physical contact such as patting or rubbing, and/or repeated unwanted sexual invitations. A poisoned environment can be created by a supervisor, instructor, co-worker, colleagues and/or another student. Even if the harassment is not directed at you it can still poison the environment for you and others.

Identifying Sexual Harassment. Many people are unsure if what they are experiencing is sexual harassment even when they know the definition and types of harassment. What may be

¹ Alberta Human Rights and Citizenship Commission. (1997). Sexual Harassment Information Sheet.

² Edmonton Working Women. (1995). Sexual Harassment: A Guide for Women in the Workplace.

³ Alberta Human Rights and Citizenship Commission. (1997). Sexual Harassment Information Sheet.

helpful in trying to identify whether behaviour is sexually harassing or not is to consider the following four words⁴:

Respect: Is the behaviour respectful?

Appropriate: Is the behaviour appropriate to the situation and to the relationship between the individuals?

Trust: Is the behaviour a violation of this trust? Many relationships are “relationships of trust”, for example the relationship between a professor and a student or between employer and employee.

Equal: What is the power balance in the relationship? Are the individuals equal? Is the behaviour exploiting a difference in power? Does the person to whom the behaviour is directed feel free to say that the behaviour is upsetting or would an objection to the behaviour threaten their well-being?

While positive interactions are based on mutual consent, are pressure-free and pleasant for both parties involved, being on the receiving end of sexual harassment is uncomfortable, unwanted, embarrassing and non-consensual. Keep in mind that many harassers will insist that what they are doing is not sexual harassment - but the decision is for the victim, not the harasser, to make.

Experiencing Sexual Harassment. Experiencing sexual harassment can have serious consequences. Many people experience depression, anxiety, fear, anger, confusion, stress, physical discomfort, decreased academic or job satisfaction, drop in academic or job performance, and a change in academic or career goals.

What Can You Do If You Are Being Sexually Harassed? There is no one-way to respond to sexual harassment as every situation is different. Only the person being harassed can decide what the best response is for them. Many people who are sexually harassed hope that by ignoring the situation it will go away; however, this is usually not the case.

Some suggestions to consider are:

- **Tell someone.** You may find that you are not alone in your experience, and you may also find support to help you plan an appropriate way to deal with the harassment.
- **If it feels safe to do so, consider telling the harasser that the behaviour is unwanted.** If there is no power differential and it seems safe to do so, consider telling the harasser that their behaviour is unwanted and/or offensive.
- **Keep a record.** Make notes of specific behaviours and comments, times and dates, your responses, and any possible witnesses in case you decide to file a complaint.
- **Allow yourself to feel.** Sexual harassment is a very unsettling, often life changing experience. Allow yourself to experience whatever feelings arise whether it is anger, frustration, confusion, anxiety, sadness, fear, or any other emotions.
- **Realize that you are never to blame.** Tolerating sexual harassment for fear of retaliation or losing your job does not mean that you have condoned or welcomed the harassment.

⁴ Adapted from handout created by the Office of Human Rights at the University of Alberta

- **Learn about the option of filing a complaint.** Talk to someone who understands Human Rights legislation and who can provide information on filing a complaint. Students and staff of the University of Alberta can contact the U of A Sexual Assault Centre (2-705 SUB) or the U of A's Office of Safe Disclosure and Human Rights (312 Campus Tower). Conversations are confidential and no action will be taken without your permission.
- **Get support.** Experiencing sexual harassment can be very scary and confusing. Having someone to talk to who understands and can provide support and information can be extremely helpful. The U of A Sexual Assault Centre offers free, confidential and anonymous support for students or staff who have experienced or are now experiencing sexual harassment. Drop by 2-705 Students' Union Building or phone 780-492-9771.