

Career Connections Series

Sexual Harassment at School/Work: What You Need to Know!

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Odds are, you may have been sexually harassed at some point in your life at school or work, but not have realized that your experience constituted sexual harassment. Sexual harassment is the most widespread form of sexual violence. Victims of sexual harassment may be straight, gay, or bisexual. Extensive research has estimated that 40-60% of women are subject to some form of sexual harassment during their academic or work careers. For women, it has been found to occur more frequently in fields that are male-dominated or historically considered "men's work." While women experience sexual harassment more frequently than men, men are also targets of sexual harassment. Sexual harassment can be damaging to all victims through its effect upon a person's psychological and physical well-being, career development, and/or financial standing.

Sexual harassment can take many forms. It ranges across a continuum of five types of behaviors that are relatively mild, one-time instances to those that are severe, pervasive, or chronic. **Gender harassment** targeted at individuals or groups anchors one end of the continuum. It includes such things as sexist stories, offensive jokes, and negative comments about one's capabilities as a member of a category (women, for instance). **Seductive behavior** is often inappropriate and offensive, but does not involve implied punishment for non-compliance. It includes such things as a professor, boss, or peer trying to draw you into a discussion of personal or sexual matters, making seductive comments about your dress or appearance, propositioning you, or making unwanted requests for dates, drinks, back-rubs, etc. **Sexual bribery** is the solicitation of sexual activity with the promise of a reward. The bribery may be subtle and implied, or more clearly stated. A professor or employer who intimates or says that you will receive a better grade or preferential treatment if you participate in sexual activity is engaging in sexual bribery. **Sexual coercion** is an increasingly serious form of sexual harassment because it involves a stated or implied threat of punishment for failure to comply with requested sexual activity. Threats, potential reprisals, loss of privileges, or lowered grades unless one complies with sexual demands are examples of sexual coercion directed at victims. The most serious form of sexual harassment is **sexual assault**. Forceful attempts by an instructor or boss to kiss, grab, or fondle a student or employee against his/her will are forms of sexual assault; rape, obviously, is the most serious form of assault. Although sexual harassment most often occurs in a situation involving a power differential between the persons involved (e.g., between student and professor, supervisor and supervisee, employee and customer) it also occurs between persons of the same status (e.g., between two students or co-workers).

There are many potential negative consequences of sexual harassment for victims. Research clearly shows that women leave their jobs or change their majors to avoid a harasser. Many women find themselves transferred, fired, or reassigned. Satisfaction with school or employment may plummet; interpersonal relationships may become strained. Sexual harassment may lead to lowered self-esteem and self-confidence; depression, anxiety, and increased feelings of helplessness; or somatic complaints such as sleeplessness, loss of appetite, and gastrointestinal complaints. The most serious consequences are usually reported by those individuals who experience threatening, ongoing, and/or more deliberate forms of harassment. Individuals who are not able to respond with actions that effectively end the harassment, or those who respond but find the harassment continues, suffer more. Finally, research shows that women as a group may experience harassment as more traumatizing than do men in general.

Sexual harassment is illegal. It is unwanted, unsolicited sexual attention that has nothing to do with romance or complimentary behavior. Targets of sexual harassment are not responsible for

having caused it. Nonetheless, many people are reluctant to report sexual harassment incidents because they feel embarrassment, shame, or fear of negative repercussions. Others erroneously blame themselves (e.g., "If I hadn't worn that red dress it wouldn't have happened.") Academic institutions, businesses, and organizations can inhibit sexual harassment by enforcing policies. Unfortunately, a lack of meaningful action can foster an environment that tolerates sexual harassment. You have the right to study and work in a safe, comfortable setting. Academic institutions and businesses are responsible for providing and maintaining a non-hostile work environment. However, organizations have no power to change their environment unless they know that sexual harassment exists. Therefore, it is very important not to ignore sexual harassment.

What can you do if you are sexually harassed? Take action! Strategies for include: (1) let the harasser know the behavior is not welcome and you want it stopped immediately; (2) keep a written, dated record: document incidents, actions, and witnesses; keep copies in a safe place; (3) tell someone you trust and ask for help from friends, family, a counselor or professor; (4) report incidents to a supervisor, professor, or student affairs staff; report to the affirmative action office; document these actions; and (5) know your rights and seek remedy outside an organization if you do not feel you are getting fair representation from within it. Remember: if the harasser has targeted you, chances are it's not the first time nor will it be the last. The way to stop sexual harassment is to take action now, to help yourself as well as future victims. For more information, see resources listed below.

Office for Diversity and Affirmative Action 438-3383; www.policy.ilstu.edu/policydocs/harass.htm

Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, Chicago Office (312) 353-7453

Paludi, M. A. (Ed.). (1990). Ivory power: Sexual harassment on campus. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Shrier, D. K. (Ed.) (1996). Sexual harassment in the workplace and academia: Psychiatric issues. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press.

Stockdale, M. S. (1998). The direct and moderating influences of sexual harassment pervasiveness, coping strategies, and gender on work-related outcomes. Psychology of Women Quarterly, 22, 521-535.