



Sexual Harassment

What is it?

Sexual harassment is any behaviour, comment, gesture or contact of a sexual nature that could be considered objectionable or offensive. It can include physical contact, unwanted attention, demands, or a pattern of jokes or insults. It can affect your work, school or social environment, and can also affect your ability to access services such as bank loans or legal advice. Almost exclusively, it is men who sexually harass women, and it is considered a form of violence against women.

Sexual harassment is discrimination. It is illegal and prohibited by the Canadian Human Rights Act. If the harassing behaviour extends to sexual assault, it also becomes an offense under the Criminal Code of Canada.

What qualifies as sexual harassment?

There are a wide range of behaviours that may qualify as sexual harassment. It is difficult to know exactly what behaviour will be perceived as sexual harassment by an individual. All sexual behaviour that an individual finds personally offensive may be considered to be sexual harassment.

Such behaviour may be subtle or obvious and need not involve physical activity. Sexual harassment may involve verbal, visual or even psychological behaviour.

Sexual harassment may include the following behaviours:

- Gender-based insults or remarks;
- Suggestive or insulting sounds such as whistling or wolf-calls;
- Comments about breasts, buttocks, penis or overall figure;
- Sexual looks such as leering or ogling;
- Persistent and unwelcome flirting;
- Displays of pornographic or other offensive, derogatory and /or sexually explicit pictures, cartoons, magazines, movies, etc.;
- Unwanted touching, grabbing or hugging;
- Attempted or actual kissing or fondling;
- Coerced or forced intercourse;
- Repeated unwanted social invitations;
- Repeated requests for sexual favours;

- Requiring someone to wear “sexist” and/or “revealing” or suggestive uniforms, materials or buttons;
- Sexual exposure, such as dropping your pants in front of other people;
- Speculation about a person’s virginity, sexual partner or sexual practices;
- Lewd hand gestures or sign language denoting sexual activity.

Some Facts on Sexual Harassment

- Sexual harassment occurs not only in the workplace but also on the street, at home, and in the classroom. The harasser may be a supervisor, a co-worker, a landlord, a client, an acquaintance or a total stranger.
- A study of women who work on an assembly line in the auto industry found that 36 per cent of those interviewed had experienced sexual harassment.
- Surveys conducted among female ministers found that 35-39 per cent had been victims of sexual harassment while working.
- In a survey of 469 female nurses in the US, 76 per cent reported that they had been sexually harassed at work. The harassers were most often physicians or patients.
- A study of women in traditionally male occupations found that 75 per cent of the women had been sexually harassed.
- Sexual harassment threatens a woman’s well-being. The repercussions of sexual harassment include anger, fear, anxiety, stress and frustration. All of these factors influence a woman’s emotional and physical health.
- Sexual harassment also hampers the integration of women into the labour force. Women who have been sexually harassed are often transferred or dismissed.
- Women do not invite sexual harassment because of the clothing they wear. Clothing does not give someone permission to touch or grab.

What Options are Available When Seeking Help?

If you or someone you know is being sexually harassed, it is important to talk to someone you can trust and who may be able to provide support. Your school or work place should have a sexual harassment policy in place. Options may include:

- A friend or family member;
- Physician;
- Employee assistance program;
- Sexual harassment adviser/officer;
- Guidance counsellor, work counsellor or therapist;
- Clergy member;
- Workplace/School internal complaint procedure;
- Grievance and arbitration, within a union setting;
- Making a complaint to the police

(Source: [Sexual Harassment Brochure](#) from Avalon Sexual Assault Centre.