



# Sexual Harassment in the Workplace

## What is sexual harassment?

**Sexual harassment is a form of sexual violence and is defined as any unwelcome behavior of a sexual nature. Whether it's intentional or not, sexual harassment often involves the misuse of power and belittles and humiliates the targeted individual by using sexually-explicit language or actions to make them feel uncomfortable and fearful.**

Leveraging power to make sexual advances of any kind places the targeted person in a vulnerable position. One of the main reasons why sexual harassment isn't reported is fear of retaliation – such as a loss of clout or credibility, deliberate attempts to undermine the individual's efforts, sharing private information or spreading rumors to damage the individual's reputation, or refusing to support any initiative the individual is involved with.

The target of sexual harassment often feels like they need to choose between their work and their safety. A hostile work environment is created when the harassing behavior becomes so significant enough that they affect an individual's work performance or create an uncomfortable environment for others in the workplace.

## What can you do address and eliminate sexual harassment in the workplace?

- Familiarize yourself with your organization's policy on sexual harassment and examine your own attitudes and behaviors to ensure they're in line with the expectations established by your organization.
- Be aware of how your behaviors, verbal and non-verbal, explicit and subtle, may impact other people. Even though you don't find something to be offensive or uncomfortable that doesn't mean someone else won't.
- Understand that sexual harassment has an effect on the individual that's being targeted and the workplace environment as a whole.
- Confront sexual harassment when you see it. Tell the sexual harasser that you find their behavior to be inappropriate and stand up for the individual being targeted.
- Know the options that exist within your organization. Consider filing a complaint or offer your support to the individual that was harassed as they report the incident.
- Connect the individual that was sexually harassed to support services. New Hampshire's 12 crisis centers provide free and confidential support services to those impacted by domestic and sexual violence, including sexual harassment. Advocates are available across the state 24/7 via our free and confidential statewide helpline.

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Sexual harassment can include many verbal, non-verbal, and physical actions, such as:

## Unwanted or non-consensual acts and gestures:

- Actual or attempted rape or sexual assault.
- Pressure for sex or sexual favors.
- Unwanted deliberate touching, leaning over, or cornering, including touching hair, clothing, etc.
- Unwanted hugging, kissing, patting, or stroking.
- Unwanted personal gifts.
- Touching or rubbing oneself sexually around another person.
- Looking a person up and down (elevator eyes).
- Kissing sounds, howling, winking, blowing kisses, licking lips, or other sexually suggestive signals and gestures.

## Sexualized comments, innuendos or unwanted communications:

- Unwanted letters, telephone calls, emails, texts, social media or distributing materials of a sexual nature.
- Unwanted pressure for dates.
- Sexual jokes, innuendos, or stories in the workplace.
- Sexualized comments about a person's clothing, anatomy, or appearance.
- Unwanted pet names such as sweetie, doll, babe, hunk, and honey.
- Whistling or cat calling.
- Telling lies or spreading rumors about someone's personal sex life.
- Asking about sexual fantasies, preferences, or history.

## Points of consideration

- It's important to note that regardless of intent, none of the above behaviors are taken as a compliment by the individual being targeted. In fact, victims of sexual harassment report that the experience is dehumanizing, invasive, dis-empowering, and embarrassing.
- Everyone shows up to work with the goal of doing their job to the best of their ability. No one should ever have to worry about being sexualized, objectified, or violated - especially in the workplace.
- Silence and inaction around seemingly subtle forms of sexual harassment allow these problematic behaviors to persist.