

Sexual harassment in the British workplace we all know its wrong so why is it so difficult to stop

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Disclaimer

This policy paper was written by Simone Cheng and Adrian Wakeling from the Acas Workplace Policy team. Views are the authors' own and do not necessarily reflect those of the Acas Council.

This paper is not intended as guidance from Acas about how to apply the law in relation to sexual harassment nor as an endorsement by Acas of practices to be adopted in the workplace.

Introduction

It's been a year since the allegations involving Harvey Weinstein revived the #MeToo movement. In this year the reporting of high-profile incidents of sexual harassment has been almost relentless. But has the ongoing debate changed what's going on in British workplaces?

In September 2018, Acas commissioned a YouGov poll to find out if the media outcry has begun to shift organisational culture and if good words are translating into effective action. The results raise some interesting questions.

92% of people in our poll said that they know sexual harassment is unlawful in all workplaces in the UK. But if it is unlawful, why is it still happening?

Key findings

- 30% of adults in Great Britain think that workplace sexual harassment has decreased in the last 5 years.
- 38% of workers said that they would be "very likely" to report sexual harassment if they personally experienced it in their workplace.
- 71% of workers who said that they would be likely to report sexual harassment if they experienced it said that they would feel comfortable reporting it to their line manager.
- 35% of adults in Great Britain think that changes to legal protections against sexual harassment for workers would be effective at reducing it in the workplace.
- 60% of adults think that better training for all staff on the topic of sexual harassment would be effective at reducing it in the workplace.
- 58% of workers believe that their current employer is doing about the right amount to reduce sexual harassment in their workplace.

Analysis

The statistics on prevalence are compelling: earlier this year, [Prospect found that more than a third \(35%\) of women had experienced sexual harassment at work](#).

Another [survey by Slater and Gordon](#) revealed a similar figure (37%) of women who had been sexually harassed at work in the last 12 months. The list goes on.

Offering some insight into the past, a [survey by the BBC](#) (2017) found that 4 in 10 (42%) of those over the age of 55 agreed that "looking back over my working life, I have witnessed behaviour that I now believe to constitute sexual harassment but didn't think it at the time".

A lack of awareness may provide a partial explanation as to why, for many, sexual harassment appeared to come out of nowhere. Or perhaps it was so familiar it did not seem wrong?

Only a third (30%) of our survey respondents believe that incidents of sexual harassment in workplaces have decreased in the last 5 years. The same percentage (30%) think that they have stayed about the same, and about one tenth (12%) think that they have increased.

And despite #MeToo, #TimesUp and #WhyIDidntReport, only 24% agree that the international media coverage has helped to improve their workplace culture.

Do such figures suggest that sexual harassment is still as accepted as a cultural norm? And how does this impact on individuals' willingness to speak up?

Only 36% of workers said that they would be "very likely" to report incidents of sexual harassment if they witnessed them in their workplace, with a further 33% stating that they would be "fairly likely" to. The figures rise to 38% and 28% for incidents if they personally experienced them.

And this culture of silence may be more deep-rooted for men, with fewer declaring they would be "very likely" to report incidents they personally experienced (32% for men and 44% for women).

In July 2018, the [Women and Equalities Committee highlighted "a lack of awareness at the most senior levels of employers about the extent of sexual harassment in their organisations"](#), but the Acas poll shows that line managers are still seen as the all-important gateway to disclosure and the reporting of incidents.

71% of those who would be likely to report an incident of sexual harassment if they experienced it, said that they would feel comfortable reporting it to their line manager.

Which, if any, of the following people would you feel comfortable reporting it to?

Figure 1: Results of the survey question about who respondents would report sexual harassment to. Base: GB workers who would report (775)



Who respondents would report sexual harassment to. Base: GB workers who would report (775)

Option	Would feel comfortable reporting it to this person
My line manager	71%
Another manager in my workplace	35%
Someone in HR	43%
Colleague	27%
Trade union representative	20%
Other	2%
Do not know	3%
Prefer not to say	0%

However, this degree of comfort around the person to disclose to 'if' it happens is slightly at odds with wider research about why workers do not report and their perception of what actually happens after incidents are reported.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) 2018 report [Turning the tables, Ending sexual harassment at work](#) (PDF, 382KB, 22 pages), for example, found that approximately half of respondents had not reported the harassment to anyone at work due to fears of victimisation and the belief that senior colleagues were "untouchable".

Such findings are further supported by the [Trades Union Congress \(TUC\) and Everyday Sexism Project](#) (PDF, 357KB, 34 pages) in 2016, who found that nearly three-quarters of those who did complain "reported that there was no change and 16% reported that they were treated worse as a result". And an [Employment Lawyers Association \(ELA\) report](#) (PDF, 297KB, 19 pages) in 2018 confirmed that the "risk of retaliation . . . is something that employment lawyers will naturally warn both claimants and employers about".

This sense of futility and injustice may account for the lack of willingness on the part of workers to report incidents of sexual harassment. Indeed, Acas found that almost 1 in 5 (18%) workers would be "unlikely" to report an incident if they experienced one.

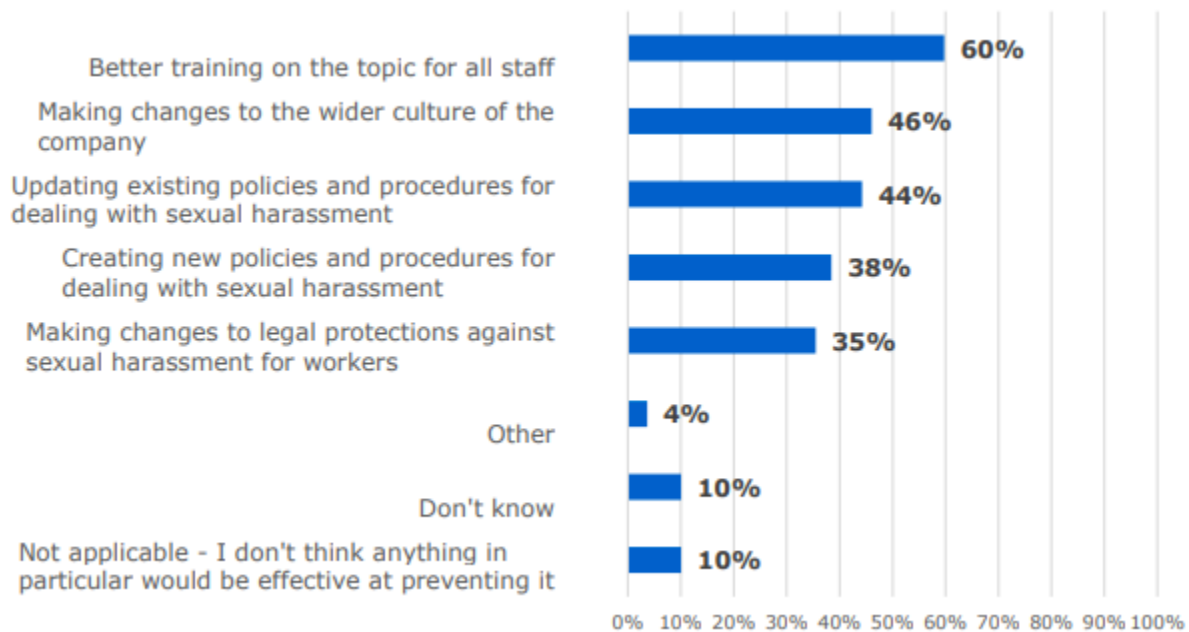
So how do we address this? Legal protections have been in place for many years – most notably, the Equality Act 2010, but is legislation a sufficiently strong preventative and enforceable measure? Does more need to be done here, or does the solution lie elsewhere?

When asked what would be effective at preventing sexual harassment in the workplace, most respondents chose 'better training' (60%), followed by 'changes to the wider culture' (46%) and 'updating existing policies and procedures' (44%).

Which, if any of the following, do you think would be effective at preventing sexual harassment in the workplace?

Participants could select as many options as they wished, therefore percentages do not add up to 100%.

Figure 2: Results of the survey question 'Which do you think would be effective at preventing sexual harassment in the workplace? Base: All GB adults (2,097)



Results of the survey question 'Which do you think would be effective at preventing sexual harassment in the workplace? Base: All GB adults (2,097)

Option	Respondents who think this would be effective
Better training on the topic for all staff	60%
Making changes to the wider culture of the company	46%
Updating existing policies and procedures for dealing with sexual harassment	44%
Creating new policies and procedures for dealing with sexual harassment	38%
Making changes to legal protections against sexual harassment for workers	35%
Other	4%
Do not know	10%

Option	Respondents who think this would be effective
Not applicable - I do not think anything in particular would be effective at preventing it	10%

Although just over 1 in 3 (35%) believe that 'changes to legal protections' would be effective, legislative changes could be on the horizon. The [Women and Equalities Committee published its 5-point plan](#) in July 2018 to "put sexual harassment at the top of the agenda", stating that the "government, regulators and employers are failing in their responsibilities to tackle sexual harassment in the workplace".

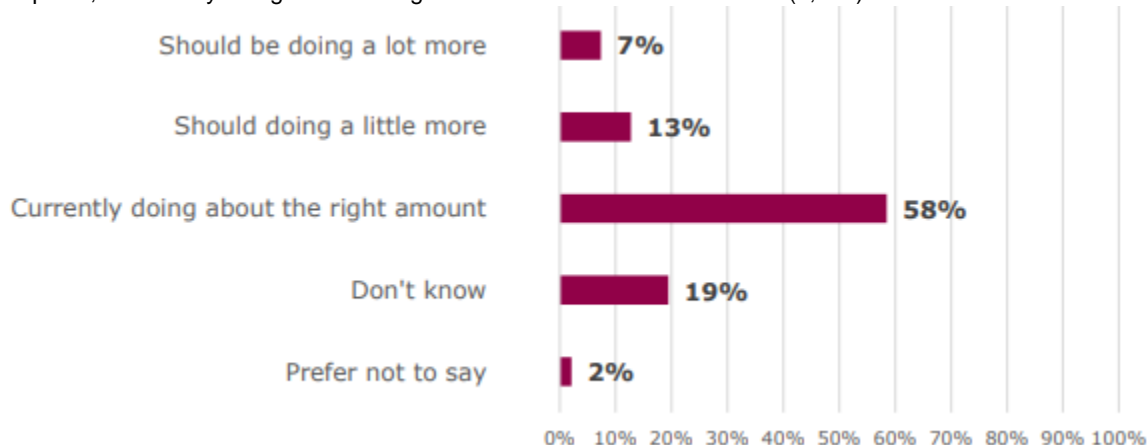
Amongst other recommendations, it supported the EHRC's call to introduce a mandatory duty on employers to prevent sexual harassment, accompanied by a statutory code of practice. There have also been strong calls for the reinstatement of protection against third party harassment, which the government repealed in October 2013.

So are employers doing enough?

More than half (58%) of workers in our survey feel that their employer is "currently doing about the right amount" to reduce sexual harassment in their workplace, with only 7% stating "a lot more" should be done. Should we view this as promising news, or could this be hiding signs of indifference?

Overall, do you think your current employer should be doing more to reduce sexual harassment in your current workplace, or are they currently doing about the right amount?

Figure 3: Answers to 'Do you think your employer should be doing more to reduce sexual harassment in your workplace, or are they doing about the right amount?' Base: All GB workers (1,181)



Answers to 'Do you think your employer should be doing more to reduce sexual harassment in your workplace, or are they doing about the right amount?' Base: All GB workers (1,181)

Option	Response
Should be doing a lot more	7%
Should be doing a little more	13%
Currently doing about the right amount	58%

Option	Response
Do not know	19%
Prefer not to say	2%

Our poll shows that the vast majority of people know sexual harassment at work is unlawful. Many workers say that they would feel comfortable reporting incidents of sexual harassment to their line manager, although some say that they would be unlikely to report in the first place.

Encouragingly, most feel that their employer is "doing about the right amount" to reduce it, but 1 in 5 (20%) still think more should be done.

Putting our poll within the context of wider research studies, there does appear to be a huge gulf between the calls for change and the practice when it comes to tackling sexual harassment at work. One year on from #MeToo, questions remain about how far we've come, and how far there is left to go.

About the survey

The data in this report is derived from a large panel survey, conducted by YouGov on 18 September 2018. The panel was composed of 2,097 respondents, all of whom were adults resident in Great Britain, and was balanced according to a range of characteristics to reflect the composition of the population as a whole.

Some questions are based on all GB workers, rather than all GB adults: here the base size is 1,181.

Data that refers to whom the participant would report sexual harassment they experienced is based on GB workers who would report – base size 775.

Full survey results

Question 1: Before taking this survey, were you aware that sexual harassment is illegal in all workplaces in the UK?

By 'sexual harassment in the workplace', we mean any unwanted behaviour of a sexual nature which violates a person's dignity, makes a person feel intimidated, degraded or humiliated or creates a hostile or offensive environment within a workplace, or between colleagues.

Unweighted base	2,097
Base: All GB adults	2,097
Yes, I was	92%
No, I wasn't	8%

Question 2: Thinking about the last 5 years - in general, how much would you say sexual harassment in workplace(s) has increased or decreased, or do you think it has stayed about the same?

Unweighted base	2,097
Base: All GB adults	2,097
Increased a lot	3%
Increased a little	9%
Stayed about the same	30%
Decreased a little	19%
Decreased a lot	11%
Don't know	28%
Prefer not to say	1%
Net: Increase	12%
Net: Decrease	29%

Question 3: Which, if any of the following, do you think would be effective at preventing sexual harassment in the workplace?

(Please select all that apply. If any of your answer(s) don't appear in the list below, please type them in the 'other' box.)

Unweighted base	2,097
Base: All GB adults	2,097
Better training on the topic for all staff	60%
Creating new policies and procedures for dealing with sexual harassment	38%
Updating existing policies and procedures for dealing with sexual harassment	44%
Making changes to the wider culture of the company	46%
Making changes to legal protections against sexual harassment for workers	35%
Other	4%
Don't know	10%
Not applicable - I don't think anything in particular would be effective at preventing sexual harassment in the workplace	10%

Question 4: Please imagine that you witnessed sexual harassment in your main workplace. How likely or unlikely would you be to report the sexual harassment?

By 'report', we mean informing someone else at your workplace (for example a colleague, line managers etc).

Unweighted base	1,160
Base: All GB workers	1,181
Very likely	36%
Fairly likely	33%
Fairly unlikely	10%
Very unlikely	5%
Don't know	14%
Prefer not to say	1%
Net: Likely	69%
Net: Unlikely	16%

Question 5: You said that you would be likely to report sexual harassment if you witnessed it in your main workplace. Which, if any, of the following people would you feel comfortable reporting it to?

(Please select all that apply. If any of your answers don't appear in the list below, please type them in the 'other' box.)

Unweighted base	804
Base: All GB workers who would report	819
My line manager	72%
Another manager in my workplace	33%
Someone in HR	41%
A colleague	26%
A trade union representative	18%
Other	2%
Don't know	2%
Prefer not to say	1%

Question 6: Please imagine that you personally experienced sexual harassment in your main workplace. How likely or unlikely would you be to report the sexual harassment?

Unweighted base	1,160
Base: All GB workers	1,181

Very likely	38%
Fairly likely	28%
Fairly unlikely	13%
Very unlikely	5%
Don't know	9%
Prefer not to say	8%
Net: Likely	66%
Net: Unlikely	18%

Question 7: You said that you would be likely to report sexual harassment if you experienced it in your main workplace. Which, if any, of the following people would you feel comfortable reporting it to?

(Please select all that apply. If any of your answers don't appear in the list below, please type them in the 'other' box.)

Unweighted base	770
Base: All GB workers	775
My line manager	71%
Another manager in my workplace	35%
Someone in HR	43%
A colleague	27%
A trade union representative	20%
Other	2%
Don't know	3%
Prefer not to say	0%

Question 8: Overall, do you think your current employer should be doing more to reduce sexual harassment in your current workplace, or are they currently doing about the right amount?

Unweighted base	1,160
Base: All GB workers	1,181
Should be doing a lot more	7%
Should be doing a little more	13%

Currently doing about the right amount	58%
Don't know	19%
Prefer not to say	2%

Question 9: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? 'Overall, the recent international media coverage of sexual harassment has helped to improve my workplace culture.'

Unweighted base	1,160
Base: All GB workers	1,181
Strongly agree	5%
Tend to agree	19%
Neither agree nor disagree	47%
Tend to disagree	8%
Strongly disagree	4%
Don't know	18%
Net: Agree	24%
Net: Disagree	11%