

Sexual harassment

What sexual harassment is

Sexual harassment is unwanted behaviour of a sexual nature. The law (Equality Act 2010) protects the following people against sexual harassment at work:

- employees and workers
- contractors and self-employed people hired to personally do the work
- job applicants

To be sexual harassment, the unwanted behaviour must have either:

- violated someone's dignity
- created an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment for someone

It can be sexual harassment if the behaviour:

- has one of these effects even if it was not intended
- intended to have one of these effects even if it did not have that effect

Who is responsible

Employers must take steps to [prevent sexual harassment happening in the first place](#).

Employers can be held responsible for the actions of their workers. This is called [vicarious liability](#).

Employers also have a responsibility to look after the wellbeing of their workers. This is sometimes called a 'duty of care'.

Not doing this could lead to a serious breach of an employment contract. If someone with the [legal status of employee](#) feels they have no choice but to resign, the employer could face a claim for sexual harassment and [constructive dismissal](#).

Anyone who sexually harasses someone at work is also responsible for their own actions. Discrimination complaints and employment tribunal claims can be made against individuals as well as employers.

Who can experience sexual harassment

Sexual harassment can happen to men, women and people of any sexual orientation. It can be carried out by anyone of the same sex, another sex or anyone of any sexual orientation.

You could experience sexual harassment from anyone you come into contact with because of your job, including:

- someone you work with

- a manager, supervisor or someone else in a position of authority
- third parties – for example customers, clients and members of the public

Examples of sexual harassment

Sexual harassment can be a one-off incident or an ongoing pattern of behaviour.

It can happen in person. It can also happen online, for example in meetings, email, social media or messaging tools.

Examples include:

- making sexual remarks about someone's body, clothing or appearance
- asking questions about someone's sex life
- telling sexually offensive jokes
- making sexual comments or jokes about someone's sexual orientation or gender reassignment
- displaying or sharing pornographic or sexual images, or other sexual content – for example, images generated by artificial intelligence (AI)
- touching someone against their will, for example hugging them
- sexual assault or rape

What some people might consider as joking, 'banter' or part of their workplace culture can still be sexual harassment.

Sexual harassment is usually directed at an individual, but it's not always the case. Sometimes there can be a culture of behaviour that's not specifically aimed at one person – such as sharing sexual images. Someone could still make a complaint of sexual harassment in this situation.

The law on harassment

The laws that protect people against sexual harassment are:

- the Equality Act 2010
- the Worker Protection (Amendment of Equality Act 2010) Act 2023 – this law is about [preventing sexual harassment](#)

Important: From 6 April 2026, sexual harassment will become a 'qualifying disclosure' under whistleblowing law. This means whistleblowers making a sexual harassment disclosure will be protected from detriment and unfair dismissal.

The Equality Act 2010 also covers other types of harassment. This includes:

- harassment related to certain 'protected characteristics' – for example sex, sexual orientation and gender reassignment
- less favourable treatment because of how someone responded to previous sexual harassment

Someone could experience more than one type of harassment at the same time.

[Find out more about other types of harassment](#)

Example of more than one type of harassment

Jo's supervisor regularly makes comments about women that Jo finds insulting. For example, saying their industry should not let women in. This is harassment related to a person's sex.

Jo's supervisor starts making sexual comments about Jo's body, getting very close and resting their hand on Jo's arm. It makes Jo feel very uncomfortable and intimidated. This is sexual harassment.

Jo tells their supervisor that this behaviour is offensive and must stop. The supervisor is angry at being rejected and spreads hurtful rumours about Jo's sex life. This is harassment because of how Jo reacted previously.

Jo makes a complaint that includes the different types of harassment.

Contact the Acas helpline

If you have any questions about sexual harassment, you can [contact the Acas helpline](#).