



SEXUAL HARASSMENT

- ALSO A COLLEAGUE'S RESPONSIBILITY TO SPEAK OUT



Foreword

In recent years, we have learnt, unfortunately, that sexual harassment in the workplace is not uncommon – and Denmark is no exception. The media has featured hundreds of accounts of employees who have experienced harassment. What many of these accounts have in common is that the harassment has turned out to be part of a workplace culture where it is difficult to speak out against the harasser – especially if you feel you are alone and the harasser happens to be your boss. The majority of employees subjected to sexual harassment therefore needed support and help from colleagues. But it can be hard to know how as a colleague you can make a difference.

We all – employees and managers – contribute to the development of the culture and tone in our workplace. And we can also contribute, albeit unconsciously, to a culture which allows sexual harassment. For example, if we witness harassment but our only response is to think “what an idiot” and say nothing, then we are tacitly accepting a culture of harassment. Everyone therefore has a responsibility. Because if colleagues are more willing to speak up, we will increase the chances of stopping sexual harassment, which potentially can have serious consequences. If colleagues are more willing to speak out against sexual harassment and contribute to a culture free of sexual harassment where employees can have fun without resorting to sexist jokes, then everyone can thrive.

This booklet is a tool to enable you to be a good colleague by speaking out and helping to develop an environment free of sexual harassment. It also discusses the dilemmas that can often arise if you witness sexual harassment and sexist behaviour, and how you can tackle those dilemmas. The booklet is available in Danish and English (as part of an Erasmus+ project).

With the aspiration of harassment-free workplaces,
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I was harrassed for years by a superior who was 20 years older than me and had a wife and children. He was playing some sort of sick power game that involved this desire for sex. And where my job was always under threat. (□) He talked to other people about my pubic hair, my breasts and my bum. And in doing so he often criticised my body. People really didn’t know what they should do. So most of them passed it off as just a bit of fun.

Source: www.dkmetoo.dk

This booklet includes short accounts from men and women who have been subjected to sexual harrassment.

The accounts invite self-reflection (*what could I have done as a colleague in this situation?*) and discussion in the workplace (*how should we have tackled the harrassment?*)

How can I work on understanding where personal boundaries lie?

When is it a well-meaning compliment and when is it sexual harassment?

Because there is no objective framework, it can be difficult to know where the boundaries lie. Your colleagues' boundaries are personal, and what may be a compliment for one person may be harassment for another. Nevertheless, although there may be a number of grey areas, we should remember that:

1. There is a big difference between professional, good conduct and sexual harassment.
2. Sexual harassment is illegal, which means it is always okay to speak out against it.

Because it can be difficult to know whether a colleague's boundaries have been crossed, it is important to ask – even if you yourself do not think a comment or action constitutes harassment. So if you witness someone doing or saying something that might be regarded as offensive or boundary-crossing, you could take the colleague subjected to the action or comment aside and ask “were you okay with them saying that?”. This is a good way of showing support because it allows the person in question to explain their personal boundaries in a safe context. And it is a good opportunity to find out whether the colleague needs support with speaking out against the harasser. By asking about a colleague's boundaries, you will be able to break the silence that often allows the harassment. So the first step to working on understanding where personal boundaries lie is to start talking about boundaries with your colleagues.



It can also have a preventive effect if, for example, you say “I really don’t like hearing that” or “I would find it offensive if you spoke to me like that” – even if the colleague doesn’t actively speak out themselves. This would cause most people to think twice about saying the same thing again, and in this way you are helping promote an environment free of harassment.

It is therefore important to maintain ongoing dialogue with both your boss and your colleagues so that boundaries are clarified before they are crossed – because in this way you will help improve the workplace culture. Working on understanding where the boundaries lie therefore means working on the general workplace tone. Sexual harassment is often a taboo subject, and the first step is therefore to break the taboo and have an open discussion about boundaries. One idea for how you can do this is to hold an after-work meeting where you play the Danish Unions’ game “Over the Line”. An English version of the game can be found on FIU-Equality’s website:

www.fiu-ligestilling.dk

A female employee was subjected to serious sexual harassment by her manager. Her colleagues who witnessed it did not intervene but instead laughed. The woman spoke out several times and tried to show her disgust at the manager. But the harassment continued and the female employee now suffers from psychological injuries.

Source: Borchorst & Agustín: "Sexual harassment in the workplace"

Our CEO was a really loud-mouthed man in his late '40s. (□) I knew he fancied me. But I wasn't interested so I didn't pursue anything. I just got on with my work. But then one day I was alone in a room and he came in from behind me. He held me by the shoulders and pushed me down onto the desk and shouted: "I'm going to rape you!". Well, there was a very easy-going tone in the travel company and the others would probably have just said: "That's just the way it is". But I was really upset and confused.

Source: www.dkmetoo.dk

What effect do you think it might have had if you had supported the female employee and acted differently to these colleagues? How is this account an example of a workplace culture that allows sexual harassment?

How could you as a colleague have helped to speak out against a workplace culture of sexual harassment? Could you have helped make the boundaries clear so that this colleague didn't end up in such a horrid situation?

“Relax, I didn’t mean it like that”

There are lots of excuses for sexual harassment, but however it is explained away, harassment remains unacceptable and illegal. So if you are going to speak out as a colleague of a person subjected to sexual harassment, you should know the excuses that are typically used and why they do not justify the harassment. The excuses help to maintain a sexist culture that allows sexual harassment, so it is important to respond if you hear any of them.

“It was just a bit of fun”

This is simply not a legitimate justification. The person subjected to sexual harassment has the right to define whether a joke is offensive – regardless of whether the comment or action of the harasser is meant as “a bit of fun” or not. So it is never a legitimate justification to say it was “just a bit of fun”. The problem with using this excuse is that it allows the harasser to continue harassing, while the person subjected to it is supposed to learn to put up with it. The simplest response may be just to say “but I don’t think it was funny – I would have been angry/upset if it was me you’d said it to”.



“If you can’t stand the heat, ...”

Sexual harassment cannot be explained away by saying that the tone of the workplace is rough and therefore employees have to put up with sexual innuendo and sexist behaviour. It is perfectly possible to have an informal atmosphere in the workplace without behaviour being offensive and crossing boundaries. Sexual harassment is an indication of a problematic workplace culture, and it is therefore the “heat in the kitchen” that needs to be changed – not the employees who feel harassed. You should be aware that, persons subjected to harassment have the right to define whether something is experienced as offensive.

“Calm down, it was meant to be a compliment”

Unfortunately, many harassers and their passive supporters do not understand that a “well-meaning” compliment (comments like “nice bum”, sexual passes or physical contact) can cross boundaries and be offensive. When this happens, it is especially important that as a colleague you show support, for example by telling the harasser that he/she cannot justify their harassment by saying it was meant to be a compliment. The fact is that it is easier for you as a colleague to speak out than it is for the person subjected to the harassment. Especially if that person is young or new to the workplace.

“It would just be so dull in the workplace if we couldn’t flirt a bit!”

Neither sexist behaviour nor sexual harassment can be explained away as just flirting. They are two different things – not least because it takes two to flirt but only one to sexually harass. People have different boundaries when it comes to professional versus flirtatious behaviour in the workplace. If you experience others as flirting in a way that you consider inappropriate in a work context, you can speak out because in the workplace we have to be professional – regardless of the tone. It is okay to say “I don’t like you two talking about sex all the time. You might think it’s fun, but I don’t.”

“She/he should stop inviting it / walking around in short skirts / wearing low-cut tops”

When a culture puts the blame on those who are subjected to e.g. sexual assault and harassment, it is called victim blaming – i.e. reproaching the person who is the subject of harassment for what has happened. Unfortunately, victim blaming is common in many workplace cultures. Justifying sexual harassment by maintaining that the person who experienced the harassment is “at fault” or “asking for it by the way they’re dressed” is never justification for sexual harassment. It is therefore important that you as a colleague speak out against these sorts of excuses. Because regardless of how your colleague is dressed or how they look, you cannot blame the person subjected to harassment for what has happened. On the contrary, you need to focus your attention on the harasser.

“It really wasn’t that bad”

Unfortunately, there is a tendency for sexual harassment to be allowed to continue because it is easier to just say “it really wasn’t that bad”, “we don’t want to make things any worse” or “no one got hurt” than to speak out against the harassment and the harasser. It is important to remember that every time you say things like this, you are enabling the unhealthy workplace culture to continue. Instead of judging “how bad it was” on behalf of the colleague who was subjected to the harassment, you should remember that it is only that person who can say whether it crossed his/her boundaries. And if your colleague experiences comments and actions as harassment, that should be respected.



STOP

It is precisely because it can be difficult that you should say something

It can often seem intimidating to speak out against a culture of sexual harassment because what if you were then harassed yourself or what if you were socially excluded? Peer pressure and an unhealthy workplace culture can make it difficult to support a colleague in speaking out, but in fact that is the very reason why you should do it. Because if as a witness to harassment you think it is hard to speak out, in all probability it is even harder for your colleague who is the subject of the harassment. Persons subjected to sexual harassment are often afraid that the harasser will take revenge if they are the only ones to speak out, and they fear being sacked, discriminated against, bullied or socially excluded. The fear of revenge is even greater if the harasser is also their boss. It is therefore important that you as a colleague show your support and speak out against harassment so that the person subjected to it does not feel isolated. Sexual harassment has to be addressed jointly, and if it is a boss who is doing the harassing it is useful to come together as a group of employees and speak out as one.

It can be particularly effective if a colleague of the same gender as the harasser speaks out. One example might be on a building site, where men are typically overrepresented and the tone can be rough and crude. If a man in this workplace is sexually harassing a female apprentice, she is in a very lonely and vulnerable position where it might be difficult for her to speak out. If a female worker speaks out on the apprentice's behalf, the response might be "you women are all so sensitive" – a response that is not possible if it is a male worker who speaks out. A man's response to a man's harassment can thus have a special effect which (unfortunately) often gets more respect. In the same way, it might also carry particular authority if the colleague who speaks out is older, has a more senior position or has been at the workplace longer.

I used to be an apprentice mechanic. And my co-worker would often hit me in the crotch for no reason at all. On four occasions he set fire to me. He sprayed liquid brake cleaner over me and then lit it with a lighter. He called me "cocksucker", "idiot", "thicko", "faggot". He came over to me, unzipped his trousers and said: "OK faggot, it's about time. Are you up for it?"

Source: www.dkmetoo.dk

How could you as a colleague have supported the person subjected to harassment in this situation? Could you have taken some responsibility and broken the silence by speaking out?



A female employee was subjected to sexual harassment over a prolonged period by the company's CEO — both physically and verbally. For example, the CEO touched the woman's breasts and told a colleague "great figure" when the woman walked past. The woman tried to avoid him every time, but didn't dare speak out because she was afraid of being fired.

A similar situation occurred at another Danish workplace where the CEO repeatedly kissed a female employee on the arm and neck, patted her bottom and stroked the inside of her thigh. The CEO also asked the woman about "when they would get to fuck" in front of other colleagues. The woman was threatened with being fired if she didn't "give the CEO a blowjob".

Source: Borchorst & Agustín: "Sexual harassment in the workplace"

Why is it particularly problematic when it is the CEO who is the harasser? And is it harder or easier to speak out when the harasser involves other colleagues as in this case?

How to speak out as a colleague

Just as every person is different, so is every situation. It is therefore important to notice the mood and get a sense of how you yourself can most constructively speak out with the aim of developing a culture free of harassment. The following suggestions for what you can say as a colleague to speak out against sexual harassment might therefore not necessarily be applicable in every situation or with every group of people. They can, however, serve as inspiration for ways to speak out which promote openness and dialogue and not hostility and arguing.

- “You might have crossed the boundary a bit there – are you sure that was okay?”
- “Remember it’s your colleague you’re talking to”
- “When you say things like that, a lot of people might find it offensive. I do, for example”
- “If you had talked to me like that, I would have asked you to stop”
- “The rest of us are working, so you should do the same”
- “You need to be careful about what you’re saying – one day you’ll say it to someone who finds it offensive”
- “We don’t treat each other like that here”
- “Would you like it if someone was like that to you?”

The costs of sexual harassment

Sexual harassment usually has serious consequences for the person who is harassed and can lead, among other things, to anxiety, chronic stress and PTSD – all consequences that may mean that the person subjected to harassment is unable to do their job. As a result, harassment entails major costs for the person subjected to the harassment, the workplace in question and wider society. Among other things, costs are incurred in connection with (sickness) absence, resignations, training of new employees and payment of compensation to victims of harassment. Sexual harassment may also be associated with additional costs because it usually leads to a poorer working environment in terms of reduced job satisfaction and challenges with teamwork – factors which often result in reduced efficiency and production.

So there is no doubt that sexual harassment not only has psychological consequences, but also financial costs.

In my current job, at the first Christmas meal I had a colleague who kept pursuing me and commenting on my breasts. Both in front of other colleagues and privately. It was really uncomfortable. None of my colleagues did anything (...) and they (the colleagues, ed.) remained silent even though they could see I was annoyed. I ended up going home early.

Source: www.facebook.com/TheEverydaySexismProjectDenmark

What would you do if as a colleague you witnessed this? Would you help the colleague to speak up? Or would you speak up on her behalf once you could see that that she was unhappy?





If you would like to know more

- **Borchorst & Agustín**, Anette & Lise Rolandsen (2017): "Sexual harassment in the workplace"
- **FIU-Equality** (2018): "Prevent sexual harassment – talk about boundaries and culture"
- **Reinicke**, Kenneth (2018): "Men who harass women"
- www.dkmetoo.dk
- FIU-Equality is part of the ERASMUS+ project "Cooperation for innovation and exchange of good practices". https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/node_en.
- www.FIU-ligestilling.dk

If you have been subjected to sexual harassment or are facing challenges with harassment in your workplace, you should talk to your manager. If that does not resolve the issue, you should contact your union for support, advice and information on your rights and options.

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