



SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN THE HUMANITARIAN CONTEXT

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Anyone who has experienced sexual harassment knows how confusing, embarrassing, awkward and stressful it is. It can drain the pleasure out of work, lead to sleepless nights, anxiety, and even fear of losing your job.

Humanitarian work is designed to save lives, reduce suffering, and protect human dignity. So it seems contradictory that sexual harassment could occur in a humanitarian work context. Yet it does. Identifying, stopping and preventing sexual harassment can be difficult under any circumstances. The circumstances of humanitarian work can add to the confusion. Often co-workers are thrown closely together for long periods of time. They might live and work in the same place, limiting privacy. Isolation can lead to tunnel vision and lack of objectivity. And separation from loved ones often increases dependency on co-workers for emotional support. All of this can result in confusion about how to recognize and what to do about sexual harassment.

Sexual harassment was not broadly recognized as a legal and ethical problem until the 1970s. Previously, many people, especially those who were not affected by it, thought of sexual behavior in the workplace as a harmless flirtation. Even today, it can be hard to tell the difference between consensual sexual behavior and harassment. Sexual behavior is considered harassment when it is unwelcome and negatively affects an individual's employment. Sexual harassment is a form of sex discrimination that violates the civil rights of an individual.

What is sexual harassment?

Sexual harassment includes unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other conduct that creates a coercive, hostile, intimidating, or offensive work environment.

A key part of the definition is the use of the word "unwelcome." Unwelcome means that the person who is the object of the attention or behavior does not want it. Unwelcome or uninvited sexual conduct or communication is never appropriate. Welcome or invited actions would not be considered harassment. Sexual or romantic interaction between consenting people at work may be offensive to observers. It can reduce productivity. It may violate organizational policy. But it is not sexual harassment. A person may agree to an intimate relationship at one time but it may end. In that case, continued romantic or sexual attention may be considered sexual harassment.

Sexual harassment refers to unwelcome "sexual" conduct and words or actions "of a sexual nature." Some conduct, such as hugging, may be sexual or not. It must be evaluated depending upon the circumstances. Sexual harassment may be physical such as touching or kissing. It may also be verbal (oral or written). It could include requests for sex, dates, or other intimate contact.

Harassment can include offensive remarks about a person's sex such as "Women are too emotional to handle a crisis." Or "Men can't be trusted because they are insensitive." Remarks about individuals can also be harassment. Examples are "You look really sexy in that skirt," or "I can't get any work done when you are on my team because you are so attractive."



Examples of Sexual Harassment:

- Making sexual comments about someone's looks, clothes
- Repeatedly asking someone for a date who is not interested
- Telling sexual jokes or stories
- Asking questions about someone's dating or sex life
- Referring to an adult as "honey", "hunk", "babe"
- Whistles or catcalls
- Spreading rumors about someone's sex life
- Staring at someone
- Following, cornering, standing too close
- Unwanted gifts, letters, phone calls
- Direct or indirect requests for sexual favors
- Sexual gestures such as winking, throwing kisses or licking lips
- Scanning someone's body
- Taking or sharing inappropriate photographs in the workplace
- Touching oneself/brushing or rubbing against someone
- Offensive gender comments
- Hugging, kissing, patting, stroking, massaging

Sexual harassment is related to the workplace in one of more of the following ways:

- A person believes he/she must submit to the unwelcome behavior or their job will be jeopardized. Example: A person fears that unless she puts up with her male co-workers' offensive sexual jokes, she will be denied a raise for her "lack of teamwork".
- Employment decisions are made about a person based on whether they submitted to or rejected the unwanted behavior. Example: a supervisor fails to promote an employee who has refused to date her.
- The unwanted behavior interferes with a person's ability to do their job or creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive working environment. A staff person who is constantly interrupted by a boss telling her stories of his sexual conquests would be an example.

The victim as well as the harasser may be a woman or a man. The victim does not have to be of the opposite sex. The harasser can be the victim's supervisor, an agent of the employer, a supervisor in another area, a co-



worker, or a non-employee. The victim does not have to be the person harassed but could be anyone affected by the offensive conduct. For example, a woman who is on a team where the supervisor is giving special favors to a co-worker that he is hoping to date could also be the victim of sexual harassment.

Sexual discrimination can also occur when employment decisions are based on someone's sex or when a person is treated differently because of his or her sex. Examples include women not being promoted to management at the same rate as men, or new fathers not receiving leave to care for new infants similarly to new mothers.

What to do when sexual harassment is occurring:

If you recognize yourself in the situations we just described, it would be common to experience confusion, anxiety, worry about your job and reputation, embarrassment, awkwardness, and uncertainty about what to do. Fear and indecisiveness can be paralyzing. It may seem that doing nothing is the safest option. Yet it is rarely true. Hoping that the offender will just get the message or lose interest is not likely to lead to a good outcome. Sadly, many resolve the situation by leaving their job, even when that job is their life work. Before you take that path, it may be helpful to try the following:

Tell the offender to stop. Tell the offender that the behavior is unwelcome and must stop. This is often difficult. Victims may be afraid to express their discomfort if the harasser is their boss, is physically intimidating, or is in a position of greater power in the workplace. The person may be forced into going along with sexual talk or activities because they believe they will be punished or fired if they protest. Even so, it is important to make it clear to the harasser that the attention is unwelcome. Do this as soon as it is clear to you that there is a problem.

Be direct. Do not rely on hints. Let the harasser know the behavior is unwelcome and offensive. Make sure your body language matches your message. Do not smile or apologize. If you would be more comfortable, ask a friend to witness your discussion with the harasser.

Don't ignore it. We all want to get along with the people around us. But this is the reason sexual harassment often goes unnoticed and unreported. Victims don't want to lose their jobs or worry they will face awkwardness or anger if they confront the behavior, so they try to ignore unwanted advances. Your safety comes first! Don't let your desire to be agreeable stop you from taking necessary steps. Don't hope the problem will just go away!

Report the incident(s) to your supervisor. If the behavior doesn't stop let your supervisor know about the incident(s). It is your supervisor's responsibility to keep the environment free of sexual harassment. He or she must prevent or promptly correct any sexually harassing behavior. Put your complaint in writing. Ask for a written response. If your supervisor shrugs off your complaint or says it is not a grievance, do not become discouraged and drop your complaint. Go higher and exercise every right to appeal.

File a complaint. Use any employer complaint process or grievance system available. If there is no process, put your complaint in writing and send it up the lines of authority in your organization until you get a response.

[U.S. civilians or employees of a U.S. organization can contact any of the 53 Equal Employment Opportunity Commission offices (EEOC), to file a complaint of discrimination. (http://www.eeoc.gov/laws/types/sexual_harassment.cfm) If you are working overseas, file a report at the field office closest to the organization's corporate headquarters. (<http://www.eeoc.gov/field/index.cfm>)}



Keep a journal. Document all incidents of sexual harassment. Keep a record of the harasser's behavior with dates, times, and places. Detail all the circumstances and include the names of witnesses. Ask witnesses to document what they heard or saw.

Get a strong support network. Any victim of sexual harassment will experience stress. Talk to your friends, relatives, spouse, or minister about what is happening to you. Many avoid getting the support they need because they feel responsible to handle things on their own, or don't want to speak badly about someone else. But you will need support as you address harassment; don't let yourself become isolated.

Consider the cultural context. In some circumstances, it may be unwise or even dangerous to directly confront the offender in ways described above. This particularly applies to women traveling alone or facing harassment outside a familiar work environment. In some contexts it may be best to remove yourself from the situation and consult trusted colleagues, security advisors or knowledgeable friends to determine the best ways to end the undesirable harassment.

If You Witness Sexual Harassment:

- Let the victim(s) know that you observed the behavior, that it is sexual harassment, and that it is unacceptable.
- Ask the victim(s) if they would like your support in confronting the harasser or in making a complaint.
- Document all incidents in writing.
- Keep detailed accurate notes, specifying dates, times, places, etc.
- Share observations with the victim(s) and appropriate officials.
- Let the victim(s) know if you are aware of other individuals whom the harasser has harassed
- Do not openly discuss what you witnessed with uninvolved individuals.
- Report it to proper officials.

Prevention of Sexual Harassment

Prevention is the best tool to eliminate sexual harassment in the workplace. Employers are encouraged to take steps necessary to prevent sexual harassment from occurring.

- Clearly communicate to employees that sexual harassment will not be tolerated.
- Provide and require sexual harassment training for employees, even those in remote places. There are online courses available for those who can't attend a seminar.
- Establish an effective complaint or grievance process.
- Take immediate and appropriate action when an employee complains.
- Protect reporting employees from any form of retaliation as a result of their actions.



Most sexual harassment goes unreported because the victims are made to feel ashamed of what has happened to them. They are afraid that other people will say they asked for it, or that no one will believe them or they won't be able to prove it and will be branded as troublemakers. Rather than face embarrassment many victims quietly leave without saying anything. This leaves the harasser free to victimize other workers.

How can you help prevent harassment?

- Share this information with others.
- Be supportive of people you know who are facing this problem.
- Encourage them to resist and take action.
- If you observe sexual harassment, be courageous enough to offer to be a witness.
- Put yourself in the victim's place and remember that you will need encouragement and support if this ever happens to you.
- Ask your organization if they have a specific policy against sexual harassment. If not, work toward getting one.
- Talk with your co-workers about things like appropriate dress on the job, joking around about sex, and personal relationships on the job.
- Above all, don't accept sexual harassment as "the way things are" or as a joking matter.

Humanitarian aid is a difficult and serious business. It is built on fundamental principles that include non-discrimination, non-coercion, and preservation of human dignity. Sexual harassment undermines these core values and further hinders aid workers who are often working in complex, unfamiliar and disorienting conditions. The elimination of sexual harassment should be a goal readily embraced by all humanitarian organizations.

Disclaimer: This document is not intended to provide legal advice for victims of harassment. The recommendations in this document may not be appropriate for every international context or situation. Physical safety should remain the highest concern at all times.