



Resource Type: **Factsheet**  
Primary Audience: **Employers**

## Sexual Harassment and the Workplace

This factsheet series explores how domestic violence, sexual assault, stalking, and sexual harassment (DVSASSH) impact employees and the workplace. This factsheet defines sexual harassment, describes how to recognize it and lists how workplaces can better prevent and respond to sexual harassment.

### Sexual Harassment

Workplace sexual harassment refers to unwelcome sexual advances, or other visual, verbal, or physical conduct of a sexual nature that create an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work environment when this conduct or these advances are based on an employee's sex. Many forms of offensive behavior can fall under the label of sexual harassment. Sexual harassment includes harassment of a person of the same sex as the harasser and encompasses actions that subject co-workers to a hostile work environment.<sup>1</sup> Domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking may all be forms of sexual harassment when they impact or occur within a workplace. When workplace sexual harassment is severe or pervasive enough, it may be a form of sex discrimination that violates Title VII of the Civil Rights Act.<sup>2</sup>

### Prevalence

While a national survey of workplace sexual harassment does not currently exist, a 2018 survey found that 59 percent of women and 27 percent of men had experienced sexual harassment within or outside of the workplace.<sup>3</sup> Of those who reported experiencing sexual harassment, 69

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from U.S. Dept. Of Justice, Civil Rights Division, "Laws We Enforce" (2025). Retrieved from <https://www.justice.gov/crt/laws-we-enforce/> (last accessed March 27, 2025).

<sup>2</sup> Civil Rights Act of 1964, § 7, 42 U.S.C. § 2000e et seq. (1991).

<sup>3</sup> Blazina, C. (2021). *Fast facts on views of workplace harassment amid allegations against New York Gov. Cuomo*. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/08/06/fast-facts-on-views-of-workplace-harassment-amid-allegations-against-new-york-gov-cuomo/> (last accessed March 27, 2025).

percent of women stated they had been sexually harassed in a professional or work setting.<sup>4</sup>

A 2017 taskforce for the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, estimated that, depending on sector, anywhere from 25 to 85 percent of women report having experienced sexual harassment.<sup>5</sup> Data from 2005 to 2015 found that employees in the accommodation and food services industries filed the most sexual harassment legal claims from any professional sector.<sup>6</sup> From 2018 to 2021, 78.2 percent of sexual harassment charges received by the EEOC were filed by women.<sup>7</sup>

Additional data indicates that concurrent charges of racialized discrimination and national origin discrimination were more likely to be filed by Black and Hispanic workers, respectively.<sup>8</sup> Finally, 43.5 percent of sexual harassment charges filed had a concurrent charge of retaliation.<sup>9</sup> The EEOC estimates less than 14 percent of individuals experiencing harassment in the workplace file charges with the EEOC.<sup>10</sup>

Employees in some occupations and industries report higher rates of sexual harassment due to several risk factors such as a homogenous workforce, jobs that depend on customer service or client satisfaction, workplaces with “high value” employees, and workplaces that are isolated.<sup>11</sup> Occupations with these risk factors include hotel workers (58

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<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

<sup>5</sup> Feldblum, C. & Lipnic, V., “EEOC Select Task Force on the Study of Harassment in the Workplace, Report of Co-Chairs Chai R. Feldblum and Victoria A. Lipnic,” U.S. Equal Opportunity Employment Commission (2018). Retrieved from <https://www.eeoc.gov/select-task-force-study-harassment-workplace/> (last accessed March 27, 2025).

<sup>6</sup> Frye, J., “Not Just the Rich and Famous: The Pervasiveness of Sexual harassment Across Industries Affects All Workers,” Center for American Progress (2017). Retrieved from <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/not-just-rich-famous/> (last accessed March 27, 2025).

<sup>7</sup> Sexual Harassment in Our Nation’s Workplaces. Office of Enterprise Data and Analytics (OEDA) Data Highlight No. 2. U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), Washington, DC, April 2022. Retrieved from <https://www.eeoc.gov/data/sexual-harassment-our-nations-workplaces> (last accessed March 27, 2025).

<sup>8</sup> *Id.*

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*

<sup>10</sup> Smith, B. L., “What it really takes to stop sexual harassment,” 49 *Monitor on Psychology* 2 (2018). Retrieved from <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2018/02/sexual-harassment> (last accessed March 27, 2025).

<sup>11</sup> Feldblum, C. & Lipnic, V., “EEOC Select Task Force on the Study of Harassment in the Workplace, Report of Co-Chairs Chai R. Feldblum and Victoria A. Lipnic,” U.S. Equal Opportunity Employment Commission (2018). Retrieved from <https://www.eeoc.gov/select-task-force-study-harassment-workplace/> (last accessed March 27, 2025).

percent report experiencing sexual harassment), restaurant workers (60 percent), casino workers (77 percent), women farmworkers (80 percent), and women in the construction trades (30 percent).<sup>12</sup>

### Women are:

- 9x more likely to **quit**
- 5x more likely to **transfer**
- 3x more likely to **lose their job**

### due to workplace sexual harassment

Sexual harassment can have immediate work impacts that impact all workers in a workplace. These impacts can include decreased job satisfaction, withdrawal from work activities, and deteriorating relationships with coworkers.<sup>13</sup>

Sexual harassment that happens outside of the workplace can still impact the workplace. If someone experiences sex-based harassment outside of work, this harassment can still have significant impacts on the person's mental health and well-being.

## Preventing & Responding to the Impacts of Workplace Sexual Harassment on Employees

Sexual harassment impacts the entire workplace, not just the person being harassed. These impacts can be decreases in productivity and safety, increases in employee turnover, increases in transfers and absences, and legal and financial costs.<sup>14</sup> Employers play a central role in preventing and responding to workplace sexual harassment and to all forms of violence that impact the workplace.

<sup>12</sup> UNITE HERE Local 1, *Hands Off Pants On: Sexual Harassment in Chicago's Hospitality Industry* (2016). Retrieved from <https://www.handsoffpantson.org/wp-content/uploads/HandsOffReportWeb.pdf> (last accessed on March 27, 2025); The Restaurant Opportunities Centers United & Forward Together, *The Glass Floor: Sexual Harassment in the Restaurant Industry* (2017). Retrieved from [https://onlabor.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/REPORT\\_TheGlassFloor\\_Sexual-Harassment-in-the-Restaurant-Industry.pdf](https://onlabor.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/REPORT_TheGlassFloor_Sexual-Harassment-in-the-Restaurant-Industry.pdf) (last accessed on March 27, 2025); Waugh I.M., "Examining the sexual harassment experiences of Mexican immigrant farmworking women," *Violence Against Women*, 16(3):237-61 (2010); Institute for Women's Policy Research, *Women in Construction and the Economic Recovery: Results from 2013 IWPR Tradeswomen Survey* (2013). Retrieved from <https://iwpr.org/iwpr-survey-finds-construction-trades-offer-good-wages-for-women-workers-but-harassment-and-discrimination-still-common/> (last accessed on March 27, 2025).

<sup>13</sup> McLaughlin, H., Uggen, C. & Blackstone, A, "Sexual Harassment, Workplace Authority, and the Paradox of Power," *American Sociological Review* 77, 625-47 (2012).

<sup>14</sup> Shaw, E., Hegewisch, A, & Hess, C., *Sexual Harassment and Assault at Work: Understanding the Costs*, Institute for Women's Policy Research (2018). Retrieved from [https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/IWPR-sexual-harassment-brief\\_FINAL.pdf](https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/IWPR-sexual-harassment-brief_FINAL.pdf) (last accessed March 27, 2025).

Here are six steps every employer should take to meaningfully prevent and respond to sexual harassment at work:

**1. Create or update workplace policies to include all forms of violence**

Integrate how you want to address domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking in your workplace policies that address sexual harassment. Consider integrating your commitment to preventing and responding to DVSASSH in your codes of conduct, your policies on bullying, leave,<sup>15</sup> and workplace violence. Explicitly state how experiences of DVSASSH will impact any investigation and disciplinary processes. For policy guidance, visit: <http://workplacesrespond.org>

**2. Provide support and accommodations to impacted employees**

To mitigate the impacts of DVSASSH, work with impacted employees to provide reasonable accommodations to increase their safety. This accommodation could take the form of a changed work schedule, or work location. Offer Employee Assistance Programs that include counseling and other forms of support for employees experiencing DVSASSH.

**3. Understand the risk and protective factors that contribute to DVSASSH**

Employees in certain industries and occupations are more likely to experience sexual harassment. This increased likelihood means that there are more opportunities for a coworker, supervisor, or other party to harass an individual. Some of these risk factors include:

- Working for tips where one's job and income rely on customer satisfaction.
  - Customers may feel they can exhibit unwanted advances or sexual conduct.

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<sup>15</sup> In many states and jurisdictions, employers are required to provide job-protected leave to survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking. If you need help integrating these laws into your workplace policies, contact Workplaces Responds and request Technical Assistance. To learn more about employment laws in your state, please visit: <https://www.legalmomentum.org/library/state-guide-employment-rights-survivors-domestic-violence-sexual-assault-and-stalking/> (last accessed March 27, 2025).

- Working in an isolated context such as a hotel housekeeper, domestic worker, janitor, or agricultural worker where the work is expected to be done alone.
- Workplaces that rely on “high-value” employee<sup>16</sup> or have significant power differences between employees and supervisors; and
- Working with a temporary visa or other form of precarious immigration status as workers may fear that the worker’s immigration status might be at risk if they speak up about unjust workplace dynamics.<sup>17</sup>

To learn more about risk and protective factors in the workplace from our Risk and Protective Factor Assessment, visit:

<http://workplacesrespond.org>

#### **4. Raise awareness**

Shame and stigma often prevent individuals from seeking support. By raising awareness and challenging myths around DVSASSH, employers demonstrate their commitment to supporting survivors, deter others from using employer resources (such as laptops, phones, or company vehicles) to harm others, and create an environment where coworkers and supervisors feel comfortable holding people that cause harm accountable.

#### **5. Train employees**

Employees need to be aware of, and feel comfortable relying on, relevant workplace policies that address all forms of DVSASSH. Training should emphasize what resources are available to support survivors, what an employee’s responsibilities are if they witness harassment, and how they can best support coworkers experiencing DVSASSH. For training guidance, visit: <http://workplacesrespond.org>

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<sup>16</sup> A “high-value” employee is someone who does not feel they need to comply with workplace policies because they have a name that is used to raise money, gain notoriety, or otherwise bring positive external reinforcement for the workplace.

<sup>17</sup> Shaw, E., Hegewisch, A, and Hess, C. *Sexual Harassment and Assault at Work: Understanding the Costs*. Institute for Women’s Policy Research (2018). Retrieved from [https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/IWPR-sexual-harassment-brief\\_FINAL.pdf](https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/IWPR-sexual-harassment-brief_FINAL.pdf) (last accessed March 30, 2025).

## 6. Create a culture of care

Above all, employees need to feel safe and supported in the workplace. By creating an environment in which all employees are treated with dignity and respect, employers can help to ensure employees experiencing DVSASSH are not suffering in silence, and that these employees can access the support and resources necessary to be safe at work.

To learn more about how to create a comprehensive workplace violence prevention and response program visit [www.workplacesrespond.org](http://www.workplacesrespond.org).

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Workplaces Respond provides technical assistance to workplace stakeholders seeking to better prevent and respond to domestic violence, sexual assault, stalking, and sexual harassment impacting the workplace. Scan this QR code to access the Resource Center.



This project is supported by Grant No. 15JOVW-22-GK-04852-NRCW awarded by the Office on Violence Against Women, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed herein or in any materials herein, are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women.

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