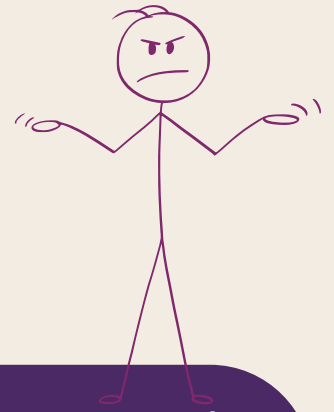




Harassment in the Workplace



Disclaimer: this is written from personal experiences and is not expert advice. Do not use any of this resource for an unintended purpose.



Our Stories

Harassment in the workplace takes many forms and doesn't need to be 'one big thing' to be harassment. Our stories show it can be the little things, as well the big, that add up and make the difference on how women feel about being at work.



"watch what you do with that banana, lest we get sinful in here"

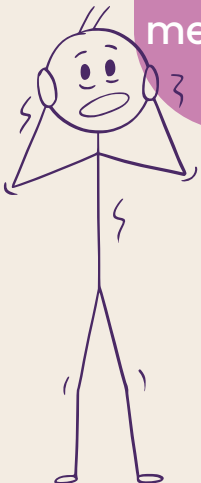
A direct quote from someone whom I considered a friend in the office. I have a personal faith, so it felt awful on many levels.

I was new to the project team and attending a customer event. Someone came over to me and said

"your people offended me when I was on holiday"

I was so shocked I froze, I decided to take the high road and said, "I'm sorry I'm not sure what you're speaking about but I'm sorry to hear that".

I was new to the office: I felt targeted, by one person in particular, asking me questions about other women's appearances. It made me feel quite intimidated and uncomfortable, but I didn't know if it was just their way of trying to be friends.

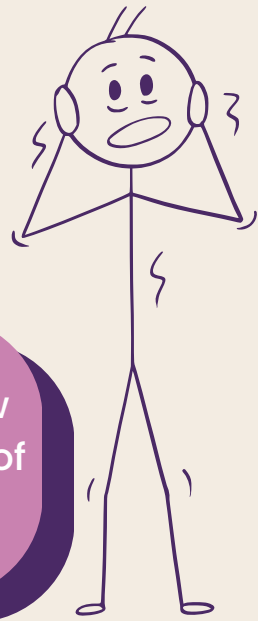


I've been told that I don't look like an engineer and have had a lot of comments based on my appearance.





Our Stories



“You’re a pretty woman, you’re going to get people that don’t know how to interact with you because it’s a rarity. There just aren’t a lot of women around, particularly young women.”

People would start putting their hands on my back, would sit really close to me or loom over me. Why do they always put their hand on your waist when they’re trying to get past, I’ve never done that to a woman.

I was sharing with my team how I thought it was funny that you had to touch your toes in the medical assessment for our role.

No-one else had to.

I’m looking around the room with the sinking feeling you get when you think you’re sharing a funny joint experience but you realise it wasn’t.


I always start talking about these things with “thankfully it’s not that bad for me” but I shouldn’t be thankful that I’ve only had these few experiences. I shouldn’t have had any.



I was pushed by a manager until I disclosed details about a sensitive topic. They never actioned anything, so I’m pretty sure they were just being nosey and wanted the gossip.



Our Reflections

A simple line drawing of a person's head in profile, facing right.

Often our instincts are to laugh it off or try and flee the situation as quickly as possible rather than to confront it or call it out when it happens. Only after the fact do we think about that.


Making split decisions in the moment whether to engage in the comment or try to ignore it can set the tone for the rest of your relationship with that person or your entire team.

Our initial reactions are often confusion and self-doubt rather than anger or upset. Doubt about if we've misunderstood or misinterpreted a situation or somehow caused the harassment by something we've done: making too much eye contact or being too friendly.

It can be exhausting always feeling like you're the one who has to educate those around you as to what's appropriate or not. I've not always wanted anything to be done about it when there have been cases of workplace harassment and that was what was right for me at that point in time.



Our Reflections

A purple line-art illustration of a person's head in profile, facing right.

Sometimes these scenarios feel very black and white and it feels easy to say something wasn't right, and sometimes it feels very much in the grey-area. It's why it's so important to be able to talk and get a second opinion.

Fundamentally, we want people to like us, so I find it really hard to stand up for myself and invite conflict, but if it happens to someone else then I feel much more able to speak up for them.

My experiences around workplace harassment are so dependent on who I've been able to raise it with and how they've dealt with it. Obviously it shouldn't be so changeable but whoever you disclose it to really does have the power to make you feel valued and empowered or to feel silly and small. I've had both ends of the spectrum unfortunately.

It can really depend who you're talking to as to what reaction you'll get to disclosing something that's happened to you. Sometimes you think it was just something small and they've said 'that's a big problem', sometimes it's the opposite.





How We Felt Supported

The most important thing for me was knowing I had a safe space I could talk about things – whether it went further or not, knowing I would be listened to and not judged or made to feel silly or like an inconvenience.

Being given back the power/autonomy to decide to manage the situation or incident how we'd like to – not being pressured into any specific actions.

I was given the forum to be able to talk about my experiences on a DE&I platform. I felt empowered to do it and encouraged others to know they could speak up.



My manager made sure I didn't have to be the one to pass the message of what had happened to me up the chain. She made sure I didn't have to keep reliving it. She knew I was nervous to be known as the 'one who got harassed' or the 'one who always complains' and that was really important to me.

My manager was shocked and wanted to know more about my experience as a black woman in society. I felt in that moment that he was being an ally and he wanted to understand and empathise with me to see what it's like in my shoes as a way to understand what I would want to do next.



Takeaways

A lot of our experiences have happened in the first couple of weeks in a new team or office. It's even more important to support your staff if they're in a new role.

It doesn't matter how it was intended, it matters how it was received. It might have been meant as a joke but if it wasn't received as a joke then it wasn't a joke.

Sometimes I've needed the person to acknowledge they upset me and were in the wrong. A simple acknowledgement and apology is sometimes enough, not always, but often.

People who have experienced workplace harassment shouldn't be made to feel like that's all they ever get asked to talk about.

Even if you don't want anything to be done about it, it can be helpful to write it down. It's quite therapeutic, and then if you change your mind, you have a record to look back at.





Further Reading and Resources!

[We're Not Getting Paid Enough For This... Dealing With Workplace Harassment – Podcast](#)

[Sexual harassment and harassment at work: technical guidance | EHRC](#)

[People manager guide: How to tackle sexual harassment | CIPD](#)

[New! Sexual harassment at work handbook | Rights of Women](#)

[Protect – Speak up stop harm – Whistleblowing Homepage](#)

From 26 October 2024, employers must take reasonable steps to prevent sexual harassment of their workers, including by third parties.
[See legislation here.](#)



Thanks to Nintse Dan-Thé, Fiona Duffy, Bea Lloyd, and Elisha Marsh for sharing their experiences.

Thanks to the YPB for reviewing this document.

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