

The Federal Anti-Discrimination Agency's research at a glance:

Dealing with sexual harassment at the workplace

Results of a study on dealing with sexual harassment at the workplace

Overview of the study

The study deals with the extent, the handling as well as possible prevention and intervention approaches in case of sexual harassment at the workplace. It includes a representative telephone survey which was conducted in autumn 2018 and 1,531 persons were interviewed who had been employed within the last three years. In a qualitative section it includes interviews with affected persons and focus group discussions with different target groups. Additionally, a literature analysis as well as an analysis of legal cases was carried out.

Title of the study, leadership and authors:

The study was led by Dr. Monika Schröttle, from the Institute for Empirical Sociology (IfeS) at the Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nürnberg and by Dr. Henry Puhe from the SOKO Institute for Social Research and Communication in Bielefeld.

It is quoted as follows:

Schröttle, Monika; Meshkova, Ksenia; Lehmann, Clara (2019): Dealing with sexual harassment at the workplace - solution strategies and intervention measures. A study commissioned by the Federal Anti-Discrimination Agency (FADA).

Results

Extent and perpetrators of sexual harassment at the workplace

- Corresponding to about 9 per cent of the persons surveyed, approximately one in eleven gainfully employed persons has been affected by sexual harassment at the workplace within the last three years. With 13 per cent, women are clearly more often affected than men with 5 per cent.
- 82 per cent of all persons concerned stated that the perpetrators were exclusively or predominantly male. This was almost always the case for female persons affected (98 per cent). 39 per cent of male persons affected reported the same, 16 per cent named both sexes as perpetrators and 46 per cent indicated that exclusively or predominantly female persons harassed them.
- Most persons affected (53 per cent) experienced sexual harassment at the workplace from clients, customers and patients, which women reported more often (57 per cent) than men (40 per cent).

- 43 per cent of the perpetrators were co-workers, while 19 per cent of the harassment cases were initiated by superiors and 10 per cent by persons in lower positions.
- What was striking was that sexual harassment against women happened more frequently in the context of unequal power and dependency relationships and more often than harassment against men was initiated by superiors (23 per cent vs. 7 per cent). This seems to be accompanied by particular stresses and strains and situations which are more difficult to solve.

Types of harassment and repercussions

- Generally, sexual harassment varies in type and severity. Thus, verbal harassment such as sexual comments (62 per cent) or other types of harassment such as suggestive eye contact and gestures (44 per cent) occurs most frequently. More than one quarter of the affected persons (26 per cent) reported unwanted touches or approaches. Unwanted showing of sexual pictures and videos (14 per cent), unwanted requests for sexual acts (11 per cent), suggestive messages (9 per cent) or unwanted exhibitionism (5 per cent) are other relevant types of sexual harassment. However, blackmail, coercion or compulsion to sexual acts (1 per cent) occur quite rarely.
- In many cases, an act of harassment is not committed only once, mostly acts of harassment are committed repeatedly.
- Every one in three to four affected persons felt moderately to severely threatened or at the mercy of the perpetrator or helpless because of the respective acts. One in two or one in three affected persons claim a moderate to very strong feeling of shame, humiliation and degradation as well as the psychological strain caused by the situation(s). Women reported this more often than men. Gender-specific differences can be attributed to unequal positions and power relations in the working environment, where the health, integrity and professional opportunities and positions of women are impaired as a consequence of sexual harassment and discrimination.
- Sexual harassment at the workplace harms individuals and companies. People affected by sexual harassment at the workplace have a distinctly lower job satisfaction, partly suffer from more health impairments and even rate the relationship to their superiors as less positive than people who are not affected.

Affected sectors and professions

- Basically, there is a high risk of sexual harassment in all sectors. As far as this was possible given the low number of cases, the present study shed more light on certain sectors. According to the study, the sectors most affected are health and social services (29 per cent), manufacturing (11 per cent), trade (12 per cent), transport (6 per cent), water and energy supply as well as childcare and education (10 per cent).
- Most cases of sexual harassment (34 per cent) were found in service occupations which require customer contact. The perpetrators are mostly clients, customers or patients.
- There is also an increased risk for female executive staff (22 per cent), for women in academic professions (14 per cent) as well as for women in technical or typically male professions (13 per cent).

Reacting to sexual harassment at the workplace and enlisting support

- The study shows that even though affected persons frequently fight harassment verbally, the majority, however, still does not seek support or file complaints. Only 39 per cent of the affected persons contacted a third party in specific situations and only 23 per cent filed an official complaint. Only 4 per cent of the affected persons sought professional help, counselling centres or therapeutic facilities. Only 1 per cent of the persons surveyed has taken legal action.
- Pursuant to section 13 of the General Act on Equal Treatment, all employers are legally obliged to set up an internal complaints office and to make the information on such offices available within the company or within the office. However, approximately 40 per cent of the persons surveyed did not know anything about such a complaints office.

Recommendations for action

Executive staff have a key role to play in prevention but also in adequately dealing with sexual harassment at the workplace. With their own role model function, binding regulations, consistent sanctions, regular in-company public relations work and appropriate measures for protection and support (in cooperation with contact persons for counselling as well as complaints offices within companies) they can mostly prevent and put an end to sexual harassment at the workplace. Executive staff have a central responsibility and accordingly need to be trained across the board.

Additionally, the **expansion of external complaints offices** is of vital importance, since those can provide reliable assistance especially to employees in smaller companies but also to persons affected by conflict situations which are more difficult to solve. In this context, assistance offered by contact and counselling offices for affected parties but also for perpetrators should be established and expanded nationwide. For this purpose, additional sector-specific bodies and holistic services (including psychosocial, legal and psychological counselling) were estimated to be particularly helpful. From a legal standpoint, it makes sense to **close existing legal loopholes**, for instance by extending the time limits in the General Act on Equal Treatment for the assertion of claims.

Ultimately, it is necessary to also address the prevention of sexual harassment in **society as a whole** and to step up public awareness campaigns, education and information work regarding this topic, in order to counteract sexism, unequal power structures and sexual harassment on all levels. In this context, education and training institutions are to be systematically involved and campaigns in politics and in sectors of the working world are to be promoted.

Further information

The study “Dealing with sexual harassment at the workplace” ,available only in German language, can be downloaded [here](#).

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