

Common Misconceptions About Sexual Harassment



Western
Centre for Research & Education on
Violence Against Women & Children

RESPECT
at Work

[ITSNOTPARTOFTHEJOB.CA](https://www.itsnotpartofthejob.ca)

POPULAR MISCONCEPTION

“

Sexual harassment only involves extreme behaviours

”

IMPLICATIONS

- Normalizes, minimizes, and ignores harm of more subtle behaviours
- Sends the message that subtle behaviours are not “serious enough” to be considered sexual harassment
- Silences many victim-survivors of sexual harassment
- Ignores the escalating nature of harassing behaviours

REALITY

Sexual harassment takes many forms, including unwanted jokes, attention, and comments, and touching. However, extreme behaviours, such as sexual assault, are much rarer. Most cases center around more subtle behaviours, such as unwanted sexual conversations.

SEXUAL
CONVERSATIONS
61%

SEXUAL
ASSAULT
4%

(Berlingieri et al., 2022)

POPULAR MISCONCEPTION

“ It’s only sexual harassment if the perpetrator means to cause harm ”

IMPLICATIONS

- Minimizes and invalidates experiences of sexual harassment
- Excuses and normalizes inappropriate and harmful behaviour
- Creates a workplace culture tolerant of sexual harassment

REALITY

Sexual harassment doesn't have to be intentional to be harmful. The impact of the behaviour matters more than the perpetrator's intent.



POPULAR MISCONCEPTION

“

Sexual harassment affects everyone equally

”

IMPLICATIONS

- Ignores job, workplace, and sector-specific factors that increase risks of sexual harassment
- Ignores the intersecting factors such as race, disability, gender identity, and immigration status that increase risk to sexual harassment at work
- Ignores subjective experiences of sexual harassment and the compounding effects of past traumas

REALITY

Some workers are at greater risk of experiencing sexual harassment, including those who:

- are part of one or more marginalized group
- work night shifts, in isolated environments, and/or with the public
- are precariously employed



POPULAR MISCONCEPTION

“

Sexual harassment is
easy to report

”

IMPLICATIONS

- Minimizes the risks that victim-survivors face when deciding whether to report sexual harassment
- Increases blame and judgment for those who do not report, implying that they are responsible for the continued sexual harassment
- Ignores the systemic barriers that make it difficult to report sexual harassment

REALITY

Reporting sexual harassment at work is often difficult and risky. Many organizations lack safe and confidential reporting pathways and workers may fear retaliation, not being believed, and other negative outcomes associated with reporting.

POPULAR MISCONCEPTION

“

Sexual harassment is
a personal issue
between two people

”

IMPLICATIONS

- Puts the responsibility on workers to fix the issue while placing blame on the victim-survivor
- Allows organizations to avoid taking responsibility for creating a safe workplace
- Reduces organizational investment in prevention practices

REALITY

Sexual harassment is not a personal issue. When workplaces treat sexual harassment as such, they ignore the systemic and organizational factors that allow the behaviour to continue.

POPULAR MISCONCEPTION

“

If someone doesn't say "no", it's NOT sexual harassment

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IMPLICATIONS

- Puts the responsibility on the person experiencing the harassment instead of the person causing harm
- Increases victim-blaming when someone doesn't react in the moment
- Allows harmful behaviour to continue because silence is interpreted as consent

REALITY

Sexual harassment can still occur even if a person does not explicitly say "no" or speak up about the behaviour. People often stay quiet because they feel scared, don't know what to do, and/or are worried about retaliation and losing their job.

POPULAR MISCONCEPTION

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All organizations have sexual harassment policies

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IMPLICATIONS

- Organizations without policies send the message that sexual harassment among staff and by third-parties is tolerated
- Leaves workers without adequate protection when they come forward to report sexual harassment

REALITY

Many organizations do not have formal policies on sexual harassment or may not have effectively communicated these to employees. This leaves workers unprotected and unsafe and increases the negative impacts and costs of sexual harassment for workplaces.



POPULAR MISCONCEPTION

“ Sexual harassment is just a misunderstanding related to unwanted romantic interest ”

IMPLICATIONS

- Minimizes and excuses harmful behaviour
- Conceals the underlying motives behind sexual harassment
- Makes the intention behind the harassment seem “harmless”

REALITY

Sexual harassment is rarely about romantic interest. It is most often rooted in power and control, not genuine attraction or desire for a relationship.

POPULAR MISCONCEPTION

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Most reports of sexual harassment at work are false and motivated by personal gain

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IMPLICATIONS

- Undermines victim-survivors' credibility
- Increases victim-blaming
- Discourages reporting because people who experience sexual harassment are afraid they won't be believed
- Fosters a hostile work environment where concerns are minimized or ignored

REALITY

Research shows that false allegations are rare. Most people who experience sexual harassment do not make a formal report.

POPULAR MISCONCEPTION

“ Sexual harassment only happens when work is conducted in person. It does not occur in virtual work environments. ”

IMPLICATIONS

- Creates a false sense of safety in virtual work environments
- Allows virtual sexual harassment to go unaddressed
- Overlooks and minimizes the experiences of people who face online sexual harassment
- Decreases the opportunities organizations have to effectively prevent and address online sexual harassment

REALITY

Sexual harassment can occur in any work environment. All incidents should be taken seriously, regardless of whether they occur in person or virtually.



POPULAR MISCONCEPTION

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Men almost never experience sexual harassment at work

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IMPLICATIONS

- Silences male victim-survivors of sexual harassment
- Contributes to under-reporting of sexual harassment among male victim-survivors
- Allows sexual harassment against male victim-survivors to go unaddressed

REALITY

While women and gender-diverse individuals disproportionately experience and are impacted by sexual harassment, men can also experience sexual harassment at work.

POPULAR MISCONCEPTION

“ Sexual harassment claims are only credible if they are reported soon after an incident ”

IMPLICATIONS

- Ignores that people process traumatic experiences in different ways and are often unable to act immediately
- Silences victim-survivors if they believe they waited too long to report
- Minimizes barriers and risks that survivors encounter when disclosing sexual harassment
- Invalidates the experiences of victim-survivors who do not report immediately or at all

REALITY

People often delay reporting sexual harassment due to fear, shock, power dynamics, or concerns about retaliation. Delays in reporting can also be due to a lack of workplace policies and reporting procedures. Delayed reporting does not diminish the validity of their experiences.



POPULAR MISCONCEPTION

“

If sexual harassment is not being reported, it must not be a real problem

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IMPLICATIONS

- Protects perpetrators of sexual harassment
- Assumes that unless experiences of sexual harassment are formally reported, they are not occurring or do not require action by workplaces

REALITY

A lack of reports does not mean that sexual harassment is not occurring.

Workers often do not report due to fear of retaliation, lack of trust in reporting systems, the expectation that nothing will change, and/or the fear of not being believed.



POPULAR MISCONCEPTION

“

Sexual harassment is only physical touching

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IMPLICATIONS

- Disregards non-physical behaviours of sexual harassment like inappropriate comments and jokes
- Minimizes harm of experiencing non-physical sexual harassment
- Discourages reporting of cases of sexual harassment
- Workplaces lose the opportunity to intervene early on before a situation escalates

REALITY

Sexual harassment includes a wide range of behaviours including inappropriate jokes, gestures, comments, and unwanted attention.

POPULAR MISCONCEPTION

“

A single incident is not considered sexual harassment

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IMPLICATIONS

- Assumes sexual harassment only matters if the incident is repeated
- Dismisses single incidents that may cause harm
- Encourages victim-survivors not to disclose/report unless the harm continues

REALITY

Sexual harassment can be a single incident or a repeated pattern of behaviours. A single incident can have serious emotional and psychological impacts.

POPULAR MISCONCEPTION

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Sexual harassment is a part of some jobs

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IMPLICATIONS

- Normalizes sexual harassment and makes it seem unavoidable
- Leads to underreporting of sexual harassment
- Reinforces the narrative that some jobs are inherently unsafe and that this should be accepted
- Removes responsibility from the workplace to prevent sexual harassment

REALITY

Sexual harassment is preventable and is not an inherent part of any job. Viewing it as inevitable normalizes the behaviour and allows unsafe work environments to persist.

POPULAR MISCONCEPTION

“ Organizations are only responsible for preventing sexual harassment in the main physical workspace ”

IMPLICATIONS

- Limits the protections that should be extended to workers
- Normalizes sexual harassment in offsite work contexts
- Reduces opportunities for workplaces to understand risk factors and effectively prevent and address sexual harassment

REALITY

Organizations are responsible for preventing sexual harassment in all work-related contexts, including work-related travel, offsite training, virtual work environments, and other work activities.