

09 November 2017

Blog article by Anne McKernan, Head of Legal Services, Equality Commission NI

Sexual harassment at work: reported cases up 31% over 5 years

Sexual harassment at work: reported cases up 31% over 5 years

In Sexual harassment does not only happen in the entertainments industry or Parliament – it also happens in fast food outlets, care homes, service stations, phone shops, corner shops, banks and laboratories here in Northern Ireland.

The law defines harassment as ‘actions or behaviour which have the purpose or effect of violating a person’s dignity or creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment’. Sexual harassment occurs ‘where a person subjects another to unwanted conduct of a sexual nature, for example, inappropriate sexual contact or lewd comments’.

Sexual harassment at work in Northern Ireland is, unfortunately, relatively common. Gender is the second most reported form of discrimination overall to our legal advice team, and within that, harassment at work is the second most common complaint. Numbers of complaints have risen by 31% over the last five years.

A survey by ACCA published in October 2017 reported that 17% of workers in Northern Ireland have witnessed someone using a position of power to sexually harass another in the workplace. This compares to 11% of Irish workers and 7% of British workers.

We hear the same sort of language from all women experiencing sexual harassment. “I felt violated, degraded and very stressed. I could not focus on my job as I was constantly on edge. It seemed clear to me that his behaviour and attitude, while it was unacceptable to me, was well known and indeed acceptable to other and more senior members of staff,” said one woman who won her case at Tribunal in 2012. “I did raise a grievance with my employer, but I became ill due to the stress of the situation I found myself in and I had to go on sick leave. I felt I had no option but to resign from my job. I wish none of this had happened to me, it was an awful experience. I feel I have lost a job that I enjoyed through no fault of my own, but it would have been impossible to have stayed there,” said a woman whose case was settled earlier this year.

What can be done?

The Commission publicises cases with a view to reminding people that they can turn to us for help, and people do come forward when we publicise a case, for example, people still remember the case of the [McKeever sisters v Herbel Restaurants \(KFC\)](#) in particular - it seemed to resonate with the public and generated many calls to the discrimination advice team. It's a hard thing to do but it's extremely important that claimants can speak out about an unpleasant and distressing episode like sexual harassment.

We also take every opportunity to remind employers of their duties towards their staff. Just having a policy is not enough to give women the protection they need and to which they are entitled. Employers need to ensure that their policies are actually being implemented and are part of the fabric of the organisation. All staff must know what behaviour is acceptable, and unacceptable, in the workplace. Managers must act by thoroughly and sensitively investigating when they become aware of problems of sexual harassment. We offer [training](#), online advice and support via the employer line, 028 9089 0888 or by email to edenquiries@equalityni.org

If you want to make a complaint of sexual harassment, see [here](#). If you're an employer, here's our [model harassment policy](#) (*Word doc*) and [guidance for employers](#) (*pdf*).