

Responding Proactively to Sexual Harassment in the Workplace

In 2017, the #MeToo movement, a grassroots campaign against sexual harassment and assault, achieved significant national and international approval and support. #MeToo empowered victims of sexual harassment to speak up, step forward, report harassment, and prevent its reoccurrence.

Sexual harassment typically involves unwanted sexual advances, including demands for sexual favors, offensive sexually-charged comments, or demeaning remarks based solely upon a person's gender. Specific examples include making sexually suggestive comments or jokes, staring or leering, sending sexually explicit text messages, images, phone calls or emails, making uninvited physical advances, such as hugging, kissing or cornering, and intrusive comments or questions about a person's private life or physical appearance.

As Union members, and as law-abiding people, BAC members have a moral and legal obligation to help eliminate all forms of discrimination and harassment that might make it difficult for women to either join BAC or remain as members. The International Union Constitution states, "No member shall discriminate against any other member on the basis of race, creed, color, sex, age or national origin." Discriminating against or harassing others is against the bedrock principles of solidarity and dignity on the job upon which our Union was formed.



Most people recognize that sexual harassment is wrong. Yet, serious problems with sexual harassment continue unabated. Many harassers fail to recognize that sexual harassment causes severe psychological harm to their victims. Some victims feel forced to suffer in silence and continue putting up with chronic sexual harassment. Others may quit their jobs, or even commit suicide, to escape the associated psychological humiliation and torture. Sadly, while more than 75 percent of women report experiencing sexual harassment, the vast majority do not report it because they fear retaliation or not being believed.

If we are to make significant strides in combating and quelling sexual harassment in the workplace, it is important to gain a greater understanding of what perpetuates such inappropriate, demeaning behavior. Questions to consider: What makes it so tough to respond to sexual harassment? Why do bystanders often say nothing rather than getting involved and taking a stand? What causes victims to take on the shame associated with sexual harassment when it is the perpetrator who should bear this burden? What

can we do collectively, in solidarity, to combat sexual harassment?

BAC has adopted a strong anti-sexual harassment policy to protect union members from abuse. Harassment may subject a member to internal union charges. Fear of personal and professional retaliation often prevents people from formally reporting sexual harassment; however, international and local union policies are there to offer solid protection and to call a halt to harassment and further victimization.

Transition from Victim to Advocate

In many instances, harassers strike when a person is isolated and not within earshot of others. Many survivors of harassment fear not being believed, or becoming embroiled in a "he-said, she-said" situation in which they have no proof that sexual harassment has taken place. The anxiety, embarrassment, and stigma surrounding sexual harassment often prevents survivors from stepping forward to report the abuse. Similarly, survivors may endure weeks, months, or years of abuse before being confident enough to risk reporting the perpetrator. By then, however, many survivors who have suffered in silence may also be struggling with harmful sexual harassment effects, including clinical depression, anxiety and panic, and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Many survivors require counseling to begin the healing process so that they feel

emotionally sturdy enough to rally against their perpetrator(s).

When sexual harassment claims are not handled promptly, professionally, ethically or discreetly, harassers may misinterpret this mishandling as affording them a “green light” to ramp up renewed harassment. Ignoring a report of harassment or retaliating against someone for filing a report is illegal.

While many mistakenly believe that “boys will be boys,” or “no harm was meant,” sexual harassment is extremely harmful to its victims. Lingering sexual harassment gossip that mischaracterizes a survivor as a “troublemaker” can tarnish a person’s personal and professional reputation and cause severe psychological injury.

Bystanders/onlookers can combat sexual harassment:

1. Remind yourself how you would feel if your sibling, parent or close friend were being sexually harassed, and respond accordingly.
2. Refrain from participating in sexual harassment by declining to engage in mocking someone’s gender, laughing at lewd jokes or gossiping about survivors of abuse.
3. Recognize the courage it takes for a survivor of abuse to step forward and be respectful of that person.
4. Report observed sexual harassment to job supervisors and local leaders as a caring, concerned bystander.
5. Offer the survivor of abuse to be a witness of what took place.
6. Remain vigilant to guard against using sexually inappropriate language or gestures that could be offensive to others.

7. Take a stand by talking to a coworker about his/her offensive language. Simply say, “That kind of talk makes me uncomfortable.”

8. Remind the harasser that sexually harassing talk or behaviors can cause disciplinary action, e.g., “That kind of talk (or doing that) is sexual harassment and can get you in trouble.”

Suggestions for Survivors of Sexual Harassment:

How to seek support for sexual harassment:

1. Be aware that the law requires employers to maintain a workplace free from discrimination and harassment. Our BAC collective bargaining agreements generally require employers to do the same.
2. Report harassment without delay to job supervisors. It is the employer’s responsibility to prevent and remedy harassment on the job.
3. If the employer fails to act swiftly and decisively, contact your BAC representative.
4. Save harassing emails, notes, texts or voicemail messages, but do not respond. Document harassment, along with names of witnesses, etc.
5. Call the BAC Member Assistance Program (MAP) for free, confidential information, resources, and guidance by licensed mental health professionals for emotional support and to combat or treat anxiety, depression, and PTSD. Federal law protects the privacy of anyone reporting sexual harassment to a MAP professional. MAP will not discuss your claim with anyone without your written permission.

What to Say to Sexual Harassment Perpetrators:

While there are no pat answers on the best way to respond to sexual harassment, it helps to adopt a proactive stance in advance. Being assertive and knowing how to respond empowers victims so they can address abuse head-on.

Suggestions:

1. Project confidence and calm, while maintaining a firm, serious demeanor.
2. Be assertive by maintaining eye contact, and speaking in a strong, steady voice.
3. Identify the behavior and explain why it is wrong. For instance, state, “Do not touch my butt, that is sexual harassment,” or “Stop whistling at me, that is sexual harassment.”
4. Tell the harasser what you need. For example, say, “Stop touching me,” “You are standing too close,” or “Stop making comments about my body.”
5. Name the perpetrator in a clear voice. “John, stop,” or “Man in the blue shirt, stop...”

For anxiety, depression or PTSD related to sexual harassment, you may call BAC MAP for free, confidential assistance toll-free at 1-888-880-8222. Calls generally are accepted from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. EST Monday-Friday. Afterhours assistance is often available upon request via the BAC MAP website page. If struggling with suicidal thoughts, please call 911 or report to your local hospital emergency room. ▼