

SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Every woman will experience some form of least once in her life. Here are some who already have.

"I worked in a small office - just me and lunch at the same time. He would read make comments rating the women in the push the magazine in front of me and try to And one of the first questions he asked after I'd started working for him was what kind of birth control I was on."

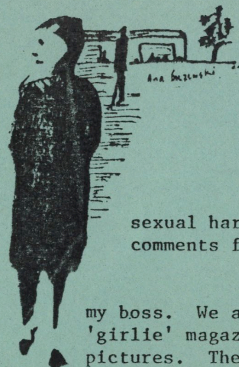
"One man I worked with used to ask, every day, if I was wearing a bra and underwear and if I'd made love with my boyfriend the night before. I was too polite to tell him where to go. It infuriated me not only that he did it, but that I didn't know how to stop it."

"I'm glad I'm not in the paid labour force, even more so now that you hear about sexual harassment happening everywhere. But when I think about it, I get hassled and bothered at least as much as other women. When I'm out doing errands, it seems non-stop. Always some man yelling something. I have noticed that it happens less when I have the kids with me. I guess it looks like I 'belong' to someone already."

"My boss had a very large picture on the wall facing his desk. That painting may well have been a piece of art in a museum but in his office it was obscene. It was a not-very-abstract picture of a man and woman fornicating. When you were called into his office, the only chair to sit on was directly below this picture. It bothered me every time I walked into that room. I had to sit beneath it and see him stare up at it and back at me. All the secretaries hated him."

"The worst thing about getting harassed is that it doesn't just happen when I'm out. There seems to be a constant stream of strangers in my house for one thing or another, to fix or collect something, and with them comes a constant stream of snide comments and propositions. It's hard to tell a man to leave my house when he's got half of the washing machine all over the floor. So far my one solution has been to hire women to do the work when possible. It's much better but I wish I didn't have to think about it in the first place."

"I was travelling to a conference. Part of my research material was a book on sexuality and I was trying to read it on the bus. The man sitting beside me started asking about my book but I told him I had no time to talk. He then started asking more personal questions;



sexual harassment at comments from women

my boss. We ate our 'girlie' magazines and pictures. Then he'd get my opinion of them



for example, did I do the things that were written in the book? I wasn't going to stand for that but he wouldn't let me by when I tried to change seats. So I stood up and told the people on the bus in a loud voice that the man sitting beside me was a pervert and that he wouldn't let me change seats. He quickly ran to the back of the bus. I was very proud of myself."

Women are sexually harassed everywhere. Men who harass women are not always their employers but can be their co-workers, customers, service men, strangers. We know that the woman who has not been sexually harassed is in a very small minority. But what can we do? Here are some suggestions:

There are legal channels. Complaints can be made to the Human Rights Commissions. Criminal charges can be laid for threats, physical assault or rape. Civil suits can also be launched against harassers. In general, however, the legal routes do not offer women satisfactory solutions. They can take a long time, may involve a great emotional and/or financial strain for the woman and usually provide inadequate settlements.

There are other possibilities for women who belong to a union. Some unions have protective clauses in their collective agreements dealing with sexual harassment. If not, women can work towards making that a priority at the next round of negotiations. Union solutions are especially difficult to use when harasser and victim are co-workers and members of the same union. And, the majority of women are not unionized.

Whatever a woman's situation, it is most important that we talk to each other and break the wall of silence. Women talking to each other can lead to women acting together. It is not uncommon for several women in one workplace or several homemakers in one block to be harassed by the same man. And there are usually many more women nearby who have experienced it elsewhere and know how damaging it is.

We can as a group confront our harassers directly by publicly speaking the truth. We can shame and humiliate them instead of internalizing and living with those feelings that we feel because of them. We can jeopardize their employment and financial security as they so freely jeopardize ours. By openly confronting our harassers we force them to deal with the consequences of their actions.

Women standing together and supporting each other can work towards ending sexual harassment. We can refuse to remain silent any longer and we can fight back.

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