

IT WAS JUST FLIRTING.

YOU CAN SIMPLY DEFEND YOURSELF.

THIS DOES NOT HAPPEN HERE.

THESE ARE ISOLATED CASES.

NOT LIKE THAT!

NOTHING REALLY HAPPENED.

Sexual harassment in the workplace is no offence!

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“These are isolated cases.”

Sexual harassment in the workplace is not an isolated phenomenon. According to a German study in 2015, around half of women and men have already experienced sexual harassment in the workplace. But harassment of both women and men is most often caused by men. Men are mostly harassed by colleagues at the same level in the hierarchy, while women are more likely to be harassed by their superiors or by colleagues at a higher level in the hierarchy. This particularly affects women in management positions and authoritarian women, i.e. women who do not behave in accordance with their expected roles and those in male-dominated work environments.^{*4}

“Nothing really happened.”

There are many forms of sexual harassment in the workplace, not just groping and indecent exposure. Most incidents are verbal (using words) or visual (pictures or videos). Under no circumstances does such behaviour belong in the workplace, where work-related proximity and existing power relations require the employer to protect employees. Sexual harassment is not a compliment, but a violation of dignity and personal rights.

^{*1} (based on Bohner, 1998; Lonsway KA, Cortina LM, Magley VJ, 2008, Sexual harassment mythology: Definition, conceptualization, and measurement. Sex Roles DOI: 10.1007/s11199-007-9367-1)

^{*2} (Dodd, Giuliano, Boutell, Moran, 2001, Respected or Rejected: Perceptions of Women Who Confront Sexist Remarks, Sex Roles, DOI: 10.1023/A:1014866915741)

^{*3} (Shelton, Stewart, 2004, Confronting Perpetrators of Prejudice: The Inhibitory Effects of Social Costs, DOI: 10.1111/j.1471-6402.2004.00138; Swim, Hyers, 1999, Excuse Me - What Did You Just Say?: Women's Public and Private Responses to Sexist Remarks, Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, DOI: 10.1006/jesp.1998.1370)

Myths about sexual harassment in the workplace

Myths about sexual harassment in the workplace, while false, are widespread, persistent, and used to deny, trivialise or justify sexually harassing behaviour. They reduce the victims' credibility and cover up guilt. Ultimately, they play down the extent and consequences of sexual aggression. In the final analysis, such myths serve to attribute responsibility to the victims for the behaviour they have experienced. Since men are statistically much more likely to molest, men also use such myths more often. Moreover, such myths are also used by women to differentiate themselves from victims according to the motto „I'm not that kind of woman; I behave properly". They are therefore also perpetuated by women. They give the impression of feeling in control and thus of (apparent) self-protection.^{*1}

“You can simply defend yourself.”

Victims are confused and surprised. The perpetrator's behaviour is often ambiguous and seems a part of professional activities, so that the perpetrator can pass it off as something harmless, which often delays a complaint. Research has shown that most victims underestimate the actual options they have to defend themselves directly.^{*2}

Employees who address sexual harassment directly and confront the perpetrators are more likely than those who do not, to pay a social cost by being viewed negatively by others and described as touchy, over-sensitive and argumentative. Knowing this, victims often do not defend themselves and instead ignore the offensive behaviour.^{*3}

“This does not happen here.”

Just because nobody has complained, this does not mean that there is no sexual harassment in your company / administration. In the absence of information and awareness of the employer's responsibilities, the subject remains taboo and victims remain alone. Trivialisation and taboos serve to protect perpetrators. According to a 2015 study by the Federal Anti-Discrimination Agency (Antidiskriminierungsstelle des Bundes), half of all employees do not even know that they can complain about sexual harassment in the workplace and over 80% do not know that their employer has to protect them from harassment.

“It was just flirting.”

If an (unsuccessful) attempt at flirtation is cited as a justification for sexual harassment, the form in which this takes place exposes the underlying motive. If comments or jokes are based on hostile sexism, which for example generally portrays women as stupid, they are motivated not by flirting, but by power and humiliation, and are not about initiating contact. But even if harassing behaviour is not primarily driven by motives of power, the perpetrator accepts that the target person will be humiliated and their dignity violated, which in turn ultimately serves to exercise power.^{*5}

^{*4} (McLaughlin H, Uggen C, Blackstone A (2012), Sexual harassment, workplace authority, and the paradox of power, DOI: 10.1177/0003122412451728.)

^{*5} (Diehl, Rees, Bohner, 2012, Flirting with Disaster: Short-Term Mating Orientation and Hostile Sexism Predict Different Types of Sexual Harassment, Aggressive Behavior, DOI: 10.1002/ab.21444; Diehl, Rees, Bohner, 2016, Predicting Sexual Harassment from Hostile Sexism and Short-Term Mating Orientation: Relative Strength of Predictors Depends on Situational Priming of Power versus Sex, Violence Against Women, DOI: 10.1177/1077801216678092)

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