

## HARASSMENT

Harassment takes many forms. Sexual harassment is the most obvious, and often the most painful and insulting, but harassment can be racially motivated, or even the result of ignorance regarding persons with a disability. Gender harassment: verbal or physical mistreatment women get, just because someone thinks they don't belong, can also undermine a woman's job performance. Harassment can be just as devastating in the form of isolating or excluding a worker from the camaraderie on the job.

Sometimes it is difficult to separate the razing one might get as an apprentice or a newcomer to the job site from the hazing some women receive when they are unwelcome on a job or are being tested to see what their limits are.

There is a fine line between bantering and harassment, and this line is different for every worker. Intent has a lot to do with it, and only the individual initiating the behaviour really knows what they mean by it. The rest of us have to guess, based on how we feel in response to the behaviour. As one instructor said at a Labour School course on advocacy training, "If you feel like you are being done to, you probably are!"

Sexual harassment should not be confused with workplace romance. or flirtation. The distinction must be made between mutual attraction involving consenting adults, and actions that are of an unwanted or coercive nature.

Much harassment is an exhibition of power over another person, such as the instructor who insisted that a female student lift a battery weighing over 100 pounds, and place it on a high shelf. When she had the battery waist high, he told her to put it down, and he placed her on probation for not using the proper technique (which she had not yet been taught).

Whether the misuse of power takes the form of just plain intimidating behaviour or is directed in a sexual manner, it undermines the competence and comfort of the workers to whom it is directed. This undermining, in turn, affects the productivity of the whole crew or classroom.

Although harassment is occasionally defended with statements like "boys will be boys", such behaviour is not only unacceptable, it is also illegal.

Sexual harassment has been defined in a variety of ways. The definitions usually include mention of unnecessary or unwanted touching or suggestive remarks or other verbal abuse, leering at a person's body, demands for sexual favours, compromising invitations, and physical assault. Some definitions include the words, "any persistent (behaviour)"; others mention "under the threat of reprisal".

Sexual harassment can also take less direct forms, such as the case of a woman who came to class every day to find drawings of female genitals on the blackboard labelled with her name, or the female worker who was subjected to a constant postering of the common shop space with pornographic material. These actions as well as the more direct confrontations, have the capacity to create tension, anger, fear, and intimidation of women workers, in other words: "a poisoned work environment." Often, the other male workers don't like it either.

There are also times when testing the mettle of the new workers will inevitably take place. It is the responsibility of instructors, job stewards, foremen, and employers to ensure that such activities don't go beyond wholesome fun. It is essential that the women workers make a clear response when behaviour is unacceptable. Keeping the lines of communication open and speaking your mind with a smile on your face can provide a place to stand when you need it. Assertiveness training can also help both women and men, to distinguish between aggressive, passive or non-assertive and assertive behaviour.

Most schools have conduct codes for students that are the responsibility of instructors to enforce. Many industries have collective agreements and most unions have constitutions that comment on the respect required among fellow workers and between workers and management. Sexual harassment, specifically named, is being included in many of these agreements. Other legal recourse on these issues is available through government overseers of Human Rights, as well as through union contracts. In the case of physical contact or dangerous mischief, there is always the option of action through the police, and civil and criminal courts.

A clearly defined grievance procedure is essential to a healthy work environment. Workers or students should be advised of such procedures when they first come on site. Support of this kind is a valuable asset to assist women in feeling that they have a right to be there. Knowing there is somewhere to go with a problem goes a long way to helping workers cope on their own with everyday sorts of issues.

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**For Kootenay Women in Trades and Technology**

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