

Participant Handout: What Is Sexual Harassment?

Sexual harassment is a form of violence that includes unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other conduct of a sexual nature. Although people tend to think of sexual harassment as occurring between two individuals with differing levels of power (e.g., supervisor-supervisee), this is not always the case.

“Unwelcome” is the critical aspect of sexual harassment. “Unwelcome” does not mean “involuntary.” A victim may consent or agree to certain conduct and actively participate in it even though it is offensive and objectionable to them. Sexual harassment is in the eye of the beholder. The way language or behavior makes a person feel is how harassment is defined. In most cases, sexual harassment involves a person using sex to exert power or control over another person, making them feel uncomfortable, threatened or harmed in some way. Sexual harassment is different from sexual assault which occurs when physical, sexual activity is engaged in without the consent of the victim, or when the victim is unable to consent to the activity. Sexual harassment is usually heard about in school or work settings because these are the two main places where sexual harassment is reported. Sexual harassment, however, can occur in other places as well.

Sexual harassment can happen to women, men, transgender persons, intersex persons, and those who are non-gender conforming. Sexual harassment is not limited to sexual orientation.

Sexual harassment includes many things:

Verbal	Nonverbal	Physical
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Referring to an adult as a girl, hunk, doll, babe, or honey• Whistling at someone, cat calls• Making sexual comments about a person's body• Making sexual comments or innuendos• Turning work discussions to sexual topics• Telling sexual jokes or stories• Asking about sexual fantasies, preferences, or history• Asking personal questions about social or sexual life• Making kissing sounds, howling, and smacking lips• Making sexual comments about a person's clothing, anatomy, or looks• Repeatedly asking out a person who is not interested• Telling lies or spreading rumors about a person's personal sex life	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Looking a person up and down (elevator eyes)• Staring at someone• Blocking a person's path• Following the person• Giving personal gifts• Displaying sexually suggestive visuals• Making sexual gestures with hands or through body movements• Making facial expressions such as winking, throwing kisses, or licking lips	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Giving a massage around the neck or shoulders• Touching the person's clothing, hair, or body• Hugging, kissing, patting, or stroking• Touching or rubbing oneself sexually around another person• Standing close or brushing up against another person

Sources

EngenderHealth. 2008. *Engaging Men and Boys in Gender Transformation: The Group Education Manual*. New York, NY: EngenderHealth.

Women Watch. n.d. What is sexual harassment?

<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/pdf/whatissh.pdf>. Accessed March 13, 2017.