

## Warning signs at the workplace



### A. Interpersonal relations

Sexual harassment is often enabled by toxic workplace culture that ignores or even promotes unwelcome behaviour or gender discrimination. Below, we have taken a broad view of warning signs you can look out for. Some of these signs may directly relate to sexual harassment and some may indicate an atmosphere that enables harassment:

All organisations have hierarchies, with different individuals having differing levels of responsibilities, authority and power. However, extreme power imbalance can be a major contributor to a toxic workplace environment because it can enable an atmosphere where sexual harassment occurs, or goes unprimanded.

If a coworker puts another person, particularly a team- or institution-leader on a pedestal and admires them unconditionally, it can set up conditions that enable and perpetuate abuse. As a result of such idolizing, recipients of abuse may end up making excuses for inappropriate behaviour from such people or not have the courage to raise their voice due to the fear of repercussions. You may also observe instances where unfair treatment, offensive behaviour or sexually coloured remarks or jokes continue uncorrected.

Another warning sign is where the attitudes of some or most (or even one) colleagues are sexist and discriminatory. This may reveal itself in their behaviour and in their speech.

Examples include expecting women staff to carry out tasks traditionally associated with their gender such as cooking (e.g., at field camps), cleaning, organising/anchoring social gatherings, accompanying guests out to shop, and so on. Sweeping comments about the competence and abilities of men versus women also signal problematic attitudes which could serve as breeding grounds for sexual harassment, e.g., stating that women are not equipped to carry out fieldwork.

In some institutions or teams, major decisions about work (or termination of employment) may be made in a non-transparent manner, without feedback or discussion to allow for course correction. Leaders may also display a marked unwillingness to answer questions. The roles and responsibilities of team members may be assigned without a consultation, or there may be a skew in the opportunities provided to each team member (e.g., 'boys club' mentality). While it is true that not all decisions in an organisation are, or can be made, in consultation with all members, a systematic lack of transparency in how and why certain decisions are taken can lead to the abuse of power.

Excessive monitoring, humiliating and personal remarks instead of constructive feedback, or insensitive remarks made in the presence of other co-workers etc can also be signs of an unhealthy work environment. Criticism is part-and-parcel of mentoring but we want to emphasise that criticism needs to be given and received in a constructive manner. Further, it is not good practice for mentors or coworkers to get in touch outside of working hours (for work-related matters), or meet outside regular work-spaces (for work-related matters) without consent of all the people involved.

Manipulative or aggressive behaviours also indicate a toxic culture and may contribute to sexual harassment. Examples of these include invading someone's physical space (literally cornering them), touching them inappropriately, swearing at them, smearing the reputation of the person who reports an incident of harassment etc, threatening or asking an aggrieved person to not 'overreact' or blaming them etc.

As we can see from these examples above, we need to be attentive to how colleagues and supervisors interact because it can tell us whether that organization has a broadly healthy or unhealthy workplace culture.

## B. Institutional processes

In theory, institutional guidelines and processes should safeguard us against discrimination and harassment, but a lack of appropriate redressal mechanism for grievances may also facilitate abuse. Ideally, it should be clear how staff members can raise their concerns at various levels of escalation, from feedback to colleagues and supervisors, all the way up to making a formal complaint. The absence of such processes, that are widely known and understood by all, has the effect of disempowering individuals.

Sometimes the process may be clear on paper but may not be executed properly. For example, mutually acceptable solutions may be agreed upon but not implemented. Institutional resistance to feedback, passive-aggressive styles of communication in response to feedback, or the lack of follow-up despite stated commitment for change are also indicate the unwillingness of the organisation to work towards a safe and healthy work environment.

Examples of this include if you are subject to silent treatment or a guilt trip upon providing negative feedback to a colleague or supervisor. Having guidelines, periodic discussions or training on how staff in leadership roles must receive and respond to negative feedback can go a long way in ensuring effective communication.

Ideally, institutions should ensure that their processes and culture strive to be rooted in empathy and compassion, and aspire to go beyond the letter of the relevant law or policy to address a conflict in the spirit in which they are intended. For example, your organisation's Internal Committee may not be able to take up a sexual harassment complaint about an incident older than 3 months, but it could still guide and help the complainant with other options, including making a complaint to the organisation's grievance committee or even the police. One should also be wary of instances where a number of coworkers are constantly low on morale or uninterested in completing the tasks assigned to them, or if there is a high staff turnover in an institution, or a lack of confidence in or respect for leadership and processes.