

7 years after #MeToo - what's changed when it comes to workplace harassment?

2 years ago



The #MeToo movement opened the world's eyes to the grim truth about sexual abuse and harassment in the workplace - but that was seven years ago.

Even with all the awareness, media reports, and new laws, companies are still failing to properly support their (mostly) female employees.

According to the [TUC](#), in the UK three in five (58%) women - and nearly two-thirds (62%) of women aged between 25 and 34 - say they have faced sexual harassment, bullying or verbal abuse at work.

With the Worker Protection Act (an amendment to the UK's Equality Act) coming into force this month, making employers responsible for preventing sexual harassment, the big question is: will it actually make a difference?

The NHS, struggled with sexual harassment for years, despite various campaigns to tackle the issue, 55% of women in the [NHS](#) still feel vulnerable, and 42% admit they wouldn't even report it if it happened.

The armed forces have also been called out after a string of reports revealed widespread abuse, particularly against female personnel. While promises of change abound, insiders say intimidation is still rife, keeping victims from speaking out.

The Royal Navy is just the latest of a long line of institutions where toxic power structures have let harassment persist, unchecked - we've seen similar stories from the RAF, police, fire, and ambulance services too.

In education, the statistics are sobering. 62% of female students at [UK universities](#) have faced sexual harassment during their studies. And, most of them don't report it, scared of a backlash or just not being believed.

These figures represent thousands of (mostly) women, who have seen their experiences downplayed or ignored.

If such a culture of silence can exist in our public services, what does that say about the private sector?

Well... Harrods! The luxury retailer is the latest high-profile employer to face scandal (there are probably newer ones since writing this). Last month, allegations emerged of a deeply ingrained culture of sexual harassment. Former employees revealed that HR was complicit in covering up abuse, leaving victims with no safe recourse.

The appalling Harrods scandal, like [McDonald's](#), shows us that even in some of our most well-known institutions, abuse is rife.

And, it's not like there's no law against it! The UK has had laws against sexual harassment for years, but the [Fawcett Society](#) found that 79% of women affected still don't report it.

Why? Because many fear retaliation, while others are convinced it won't make a difference. It's often felt that some institutions choose to protect their own reputations, rather than their employees.

And, a large number of victims don't actually know whether they're a victim – or not. People are often gaslit – 'It was flattery, just banter... can't you take a joke?'

The Worker Protection Act aims to change this. As of the 26th of this month, employers are legally obliged to prevent sexual harassment, rather than just respond to it after it's happened.

This includes employing proper reporting mechanisms, offering training to employees, and having a standalone sexual harassment policy.

But will businesses take the law seriously, or will they just tick boxes without changing their internal cultures?

Ruth Sparkes, co-founder of [SaferSpace](#), an app providing a safe reporting mechanism for misconduct, says that it's time for leadership to take responsibility, she was 17 when she first experienced sexual harassment.

"It's not enough for companies to say they have a 'zero-tolerance' policy. We need to see action – and real consequences for those who enable abuse," she explains.

Sparkes believes that employers who continue to turn a blind eye will find themselves facing serious legal and reputational consequences.

"The harsh truth is that too many organisations will still prioritise damage control over the safety of their staff. Doesn't matter whether it's the public or private sector, or within education... sexual harassment remains a significant issue.

“We need to stop pretending that posting signs in a staff room or saying you have a ‘zero-tolerance’ policy will make a difference. Real change requires real commitment.

“The Worker Protection Act is a massive step in the right direction, but it will take more than legislation to tackle this problem.”

Will the UK finally take the necessary steps to protect its workers and students, or will this be yet another missed opportunity?

Seven years after #MeToo, it’s a question we shouldn’t still be asking.