

Festive jobs increase risk of sexual harassment

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As the festive season arrives, lots of young people across the UK are gearing up to earn extra cash by taking on temporary roles in the hospitality sector.

Pubs, restaurants, and hotels see a sharp increase in staff during this busy period, many of whom are students and young adults hoping to earn some extra money.

However, beneath the tinsel and festive cheer lies a worrying reality: 90% of hospitality staff have experienced sexual harassment at work, according to a survey by [Unite the Union](#).

“Late nights combined with drunk customers create a dangerous mix,” warns Ruth Sparkes, co-founder of SaferSpace, an organisation dedicated to preventing and reporting workplace harassment. “For many young people, it feels as though sexual harassment is just ‘part of the job.’ It isn’t—and it shouldn’t be tolerated.”

A magnet for young workers

Recent figures from the [Office for National Statistics](#) show that approximately one-third of workers in the hospitality sector are aged between 16 and 24.

“These young workers often don’t know their rights or they’re afraid of speaking out, they don’t know where to turn,” says Sparkes. “The fear of losing their jobs or getting a bad reference creates an environment where sexual harassment can go unchecked.”

The risks female workers face

The hospitality industry poses unique challenges, especially during the Christmas season. Alcohol-fuelled behaviour from customers, coupled with late-night shifts, can leave staff, especially females, vulnerable.

A former bar worker shared her experience: “During a Christmas party, a large group of men kept making crude comments about me, and they kept trying to touch me. When I reported it to my manager, he dismissed it, saying, ‘They’re just drunk – smile and get on with it... think of the tips!’ I felt completely helpless.”

Legal changes aim to protect workers

The UK government has taken steps to address the issue. The Worker Protection (Amendment of Equality Act 2010) Act places a new duty on employers to prevent sexual harassment in the workplace, including at off-site events like Christmas parties.

Sparkes emphasises that while legislative changes are essential, they are not enough on their own: “The Worker Protection Act sends a strong message to employers, but real change requires enforcement and a huge shift in some workplaces’ culture.

“Policies are only as effective as the commitment to implement them. Every member of staff should feel safe and respected, especially during such a high-pressure time.”

How workers can protect themselves

While the onus is on employers to create a safe working environment, workers can take steps to protect themselves:

- Know your rights: Familiarise yourself with workplace policies and procedures for reporting sexual harassment.
- Support each other: Work alongside colleagues during late or isolated shifts and keep an eye out for one another.
- Address inappropriate behaviour: If a customer or colleague crosses the line, let them know their behaviour is unacceptable and seek assistance if needed.
- Report and document: If harassment occurs, report it to management or HR and keep a detailed record of incidents, including dates, times, and any witnesses.

Employers need to step up

While workers can take precautions, Sparkes stresses that the ultimate responsibility lies with employers. “It’s not enough to have policies on paper,” she says. “Employers must provide proper training, take complaints seriously, and foster a workplace culture where harassment is immediately addressed – a simple reporting tool like [SaferSpace](#) is ideal.”

“The hospitality sector is the beating heart of the festive season,” Sparkes adds. “It’s where we celebrate and connect. But it must be safe for everyone – especially those working hard to ensure we all have a good time.”