

Call for action as report exposes scale of sexual harassment at work

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A new survey has revealed that sexual harassment remains widespread and underreported in UK workplaces, prompting renewed pressure on employers to act as legal reforms advance.

The [Unite the Union](#) survey of more than 23,000 workers found that 60 per cent of women have experienced sexual harassment during their working lives. In Scotland, nearly 40 per cent of women said they had been harassed. Most of those affected did not report what happened, citing fears of not being believed or of facing retaliation. Many said they were not sure how or where to report it.

This week, the government confirmed that its new Employment Rights Bill will include a ban on employers using non-disclosure agreements to silence victims of workplace abuse. The legislation, which also strengthens employers' responsibilities around harassment, builds on the Worker Protection Act that came into force in 2024. It places a legal duty on employers to take reasonable steps to prevent sexual harassment and improve response procedures.

Ruth Sparkes, who co-founded the reporting platform SaferSpace with Sunita Gordon and Shane Mann, said the survey results were sadly unsurprising.

"This confirms what many of us already knew. The reality for a huge number of workers, especially women and young people, is that they experience harassment and don't report it. Sometimes it's fear. Sometimes it's uncertainty. Often it's because they've seen what happens when others try to speak up," she said.

Sparkes, a former Royal Navy engineer, said the death of soldier Jaysley Beck in 2021 after sustained harassment by a senior officer had stayed with her throughout the project. She described Beck's case as "a tragic example of what happens when systems fail the people they are supposed to protect".

SaferSpace was created in 2024 to provide a secure, confidential platform for staff to report workplace concerns. The app allows anonymous or named submissions, with reports routed to designated safeguarding or HR staff for triage and follow-up. A built-in chatbot, based on the UK Equality Act, helps users check whether their experience may constitute harassment or discrimination. All reports are securely logged and auditable, with oversight dashboards for governance teams.

Recent years have seen repeated failures across sectors. McDonald's UK has received more than 1,000 reports of workplace harassment, including allegations of "sex for shifts", resulting in a legal agreement with the Equality and Human Rights Commission. Harrods is currently facing over 250 misconduct claims, while more than 100 members of the armed forces have been dismissed for harassment-related misconduct.

Sparkes said that while stronger laws were welcome, cultural change would only come if employers backed them with credible action.

"We keep asking people to speak up, but we've done far less to make sure they're heard. That has to change. Policies are not protection if they exist only on paper," she said.

SaferSpace is currently being piloted in healthcare, education, retail and logistics organisations. More information is available at www.safer.space.io.