

Corporate culture of respect prevents sexual harassment in the workplace

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Potentially harassing behaviour is a daily occurrence in many places – and it's not always men who are the offenders and women the victims. This is the conclusion of a study carried out by the National Research Programme "Gender Equality" (NRP 60). There is no such thing as a typical offender or victim profile; much more important is the corporate culture.

Sexist comments, lewd e-mails, seemingly accidental touching, forced kisses: there are many forms of possible [sexual harassment](#) in the workplace. Men are, by far, not always the offenders and women the victims, as demonstrated by Franciska Krings' research group at the University of Lausanne as well as that of Marianne Schär Moser's research and consulting firm.

Differences in the subjective perception

Based on their own surveys and previously collected figures, the researchers have been able to draw a representative picture of the extent of sexual harassment in the workplace in Switzerland. Overall, approximately half of the more than 2,400 employees surveyed indicated that they had experienced at least one occurrence of unwanted, potentially harassing behaviour – men and women to similar degrees. More prevalent among women is the subjective perception of having been harrassed, which has been the benchmark for sexual harassment since the Federal Act on Gender Equality: in German-speaking

Switzerland, around 31 percent of all women felt they had been sexually harassed in the workplace; in French- and Italian-speaking Switzerland, this figure was around 18 percent. Amongst men these figures were 11 percent (German-speaking areas), 7 percent (French-speaking areas) and 6 percent (Italian-speaking Tessin). One reason for women's higher subjective perception of having been affected, says Krings, is that sexually harassing behaviour is more threatening for them than for men because of the traditional division of power in society and in many companies, and because of the sexes' relative physical strength."

A similar picture was revealed by a second survey in which 800 men and women reported situations of potential sexual harassment from the viewpoint of the perpetrator. Sixty-six percent of women and 71 percent of men admitted to having demonstrated at least once in the past 12 months behaviour which could have been perceived as harassment by the other person involved in the interaction; examples included making sexist remarks, initiating a sexual discussion, distributing pornographic material or even having touched a co-worker in an indecent manner. And the survey respondents admitted to being aware that their behaviour was inappropriate and hurtful. In general the various surveys pointed out a clear consensus of what sexual harassment in the workplace is and that such behaviour is harmful.

Forgotten regulations

The researchers found no hints of typical personality traits in either victims or offenders. "There is no such thing as a typical offender or a typical victim," says Krings. And yet, all the results indicate that the corporate culture is decisive in whether or not sexual harassment occurs. The likelihood of infractions is considerably higher in a sexualised work environment in which double entendres are the norm. A work environment characterised by mutual respect and basic ethical principles provides a preventive effect. Regulations regarding sexual harassment in

the workplace are a first step, say the researchers, but they are by themselves insufficient: many employees and even upper management don't even know if their company has such regulations in place.

"Measures to prevent sexual harassment are necessary and must include both men and women – not only as victims but also as possible perpetrators," says Krings. What such awareness training might look like was the subject of discussion with an advisory group consisting of representatives of the federal government, employees, employers, equality offices and other experts. One important recommendation of this advisory group was that education campaigns and general prevention of sexual harassment in the workplace should take place in a broader context. The topic might be integrated, for instance, into measures for furthering mutual respect in the workplace. "This awakens less resistance than handling the topic of harassment by itself – discussions in which men in particular often feel that they are under suspicion," says Krings. It is also important, however, that managers take decisive action quickly in the event of sexual harassment: this sends a clear signal and fosters the development of a respectful [corporate culture](#) – and the victims can come to terms with their situation more quickly and more fully.

More information: www.nfp60.ch/E/projects/work_o...e/Pages/default.aspx

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