

Sexual harassment in the workplace: how organizational policies can make a difference

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Credit: Florida International University

Employees are more likely to report sexual harassment they witness at work when there is a zero-tolerance policy in place, according to a new study by Florida International University researchers.

Findings show companies where zero-tolerance policies are a top-priority are particularly effective in increasing the reporting of the most common forms of sexual harassment, whether moderate or severe, including sexually suggestive remarks that create a hostile work environment. The study is the first to show organizational policies can actually influence a person's willingness to [report](#) sexual harassment they witness.

"We have known for some time that organizational policies around sexual harassment are related to [employee](#) harassment behavior, but it wasn't clear if the policies were actually responsible for employee behavior," said Asia Eaton, psychology professor at FIU and study co-author. "We now have causal evidence showing that zero-tolerance organizational policies around sexual harassment, at least in some contexts, actually increases bystander willingness to report observed infractions."

According to the study, a standard policy statement saying "we are an equal opportunity organization and subscribe to federal and state laws which forbid discrimination and harassment" is not as effective as a zero-tolerance policy that provides a clear framework for interpreting and acting on what someone may witness or experience.

Researchers recommend companies take these steps to implement an effective zero-tolerance policy:

1. **Look at your policy:** Does your organization have a zero-tolerance policy that explicitly prohibits both moderate and severe sexual harassment? Does leadership adhere to the policy and frequently ensure it is understood by all members of the organization? Does it rely too heavily on victim reporting? Optimal policies bring all employees into the circle and encourage a culture that does not tolerate harassment.

2. **Encourage diversity:** Organizations and industries that are numerically male-dominated and have less gender diversity may be more likely to experience sexual harassment in the workplace and substantially more likely if the policies and culture are not in place. Diversity in leadership is also important.
3. **Follow-through:** Leaders need to set the tone for the organization and be explicit in their expectations. When harassment is reported, perpetrators should be held accountable.

For this study, Eaton and Ph.D. student Ryan K. Jacobson conducted two assessments—one with undergraduate students using a fictitious company and policies and another with human resources professionals using actual policy statements from a real organization. Student and employee participants in both scenarios indicated they would be more likely to formally report instances of [sexual harassment](#) when they were shown an organizational policy that was explicitly zero-tolerance.

Results also show a zero-tolerance organizational policy can increase the likelihood that more severe [harassment](#), including 'quid-pro-quo'—where the harasser offers the employee something in return for satisfying a sexual demand—would be reported by employee bystanders.

Eaton and Jacobson recommend implementing and repeatedly emphasizing a zero-tolerance [policy](#). By explicitly indicating all forms of sexual harassing behaviors are completely unacceptable, reports of these unwanted experiences by both victims and bystanders would likely increase.

More information: Ryan K. Jacobson et al. How Organizational Policies Influence Bystander Likelihood of Reporting Moderate and Severe Sexual Harassment at Work, *Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal* (2017). [DOI: 10.1007/s10672-017-9309-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10672-017-9309-1)

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