

# How organizations can address toxic workplace cultures to tackle sexual harassment

October 27 2023, by Angela Workman-Stark, Jennifer L. Berdahl and Lilia M. Cortina

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Sexual harassment continues to be a problem in Canadian workplaces, and organizations are not doing enough to address it. A 2022 report by the [Canadian Labour Congress](#) indicates nearly one in two workers have experienced sexual harassment in the previous two years.

A large part of the problem is how the issue is being viewed. Sexual [harassment](#) is a [human rights](#) violation, yet too often it is framed as an interpersonal issue. As a result, organizations [adopt solutions aimed at addressing individual behaviors](#), like building out reporting mechanisms or beefing up reprimands. Solutions that frequently fail. Punishing harassers is important, but only doing that means we only remedy sexual harassment one offender at a time.

Unfortunately, this "rotten apples" approach does little to reduce sexual harassment. For one, it overlooks the systemic causes of harassment, such as [an organization's culture and leadership](#).

It also ignores [research](#) showing that the best predictors of harassment are features of the organization, not the harasser. To move the needle on these issues, we need to fundamentally change how organizations deal with workplace sexual harassment.

## **Reframing sexual harassment**

Simply put, sexual harassment is an organizational problem rather than just an interpersonal one. Therefore, we need to start looking at harassment in the context of the organization and the surrounding environment.

Sexual harassment is more likely to occur in [organizations dominated by men](#) and defined by [masculinity contest cultures](#). These cultures tend to emphasize strength and stamina, such as carrying heavy workloads and working long hours, putting work before family, avoiding displays of weakness, taking unreasonable risks and engaging in dog-eat-dog competition.

Frequently accompanied by attempts to deny or justify harassment, masculinity contest cultures can compel individuals to preserve and protect their identities as "real men" by [harassing others](#).

For example, policing has been described as a [cult of masculinity](#) that is often expressed through misogynistic attitudes toward women. The enforcement of strict masculine norms (e.g., show no weakness, strength and stamina, "being seen to be keen") encourages officers to overemphasize their masculinity and repress emotions. [Those who don't conform are often subjected to ridicule, rejection and harassment](#).

In a different context, academic [culture](#) promotes masculinity contests by rewarding signs of strength and stamina. Its [promotion system, which penalizes faculty who take time off for health and family](#), rewards overly competitive scholarship and dog-eat-dog behavior, such as taking credit for the work of others.

It's no wonder that research shows [academia has the highest rate of sexual harassment](#) outside the military.

[When leaders promote, or fail to challenge, these toxic cultures](#), they allow them to flourish and sexual harassment to persist.

## **Beyond reporting**

Maintaining harassment-free workplaces is not only the right thing to do,

but it is also required by [Canadian human rights](#) legislation. However, consideration of harassment as [human rights violations](#) tends to occur only when organizations are facing legal jeopardy. The implication is that organizations are more focused on achieving compliance rather than preventing sexual harassment.

To do things differently, leaders must examine the [social norms](#), practices and [belief systems](#) that underpin sexual harassment. Simply having a formal reporting process won't cut it.

The reality is that many people are reluctant [to speak up about sexual harassment. And when they do, they are often silenced](#). Formal complaints are also after-the-fact measures that don't proactively prevent harassment from happening in the first place.

Periodic self-studies can offer important insights into how [organizational culture](#) and practices can be improved. For example, [climate surveys](#) typically assess employee perceptions of leadership, culture and workplace interactions and experiences.

These assessments can provide a deeper understanding of the organizational context that might enable sexual harassment. They can also serve as an early warning system to prevent toxic environments from developing.

## **Change requires bold leadership**

Viewing harassment through an organizational lens means addressing the systemic factors that contribute to harassment. This could involve changing recruitment, training and mentoring processes to promote better behavior.

These are big changes, requiring bold leaders who model ethical values,

clearly communicate their expectations and hold people accountable for violating [ethical standards](#).

Encouragingly, [research](#) shows that when leaders treat employees fairly, this sets an example for how members of the organization should treat one another. Fair practices also have the potential to [counteract the effects of masculinity contest cultures and reduce harassment](#).

Enhancing gender diversity in organizations, especially at the top, may also help drive down harassment rates. [Hiring more women](#) and gender-diverse people, and integrating them throughout the organization can help create an environment in which power and influence are shared.

Unfortunately, there is no magic bullet to address sexual harassment. But we can reduce it by taking steps that improve organizational cultures. We can also reinforce the message that [sexual harassment](#) is a [human rights violation](#) requiring our best efforts to confront it, not an interpersonal problem left to others to sort out.

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