

# Preventing and Responding to Workplace Sexual Harassment During COVID-19

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## A Changing Work Environment

Workplace sexual harassment attacks a person's gender or sexuality and is therefore a form of gender-based violence. At the same time, it attacks a worker's livelihood and can create a hostile work environment. During this time of a pandemic, employers are still responsible for ensuring the health and safety of all workers, and this includes ensuring a work environment free from sexual harassment. As many workers shift to working from home, or to new work arrangements with fewer people present at one time, employers should be aware of the potential for increased sexual harassment, and the new ways in which it might appear.

The boundary between work and personal lives may become blurred as workers take meetings at their kitchen tables, and "water cooler" talk is replaced by banter in online chatrooms. When this happens, employers may find that their policies related to worker safety and respect in the workplace are ineffective or inapplicable.

Workplace sexual harassment policies should be updated to account for new or increased risk to workers.

## Increased Vulnerability

Research shows that gender-based violence increases during disasters, including pandemics like SARS, Ebola, and COVID-19. An unprecedented number of people are facing job insecurity, a loss of power and control, and uncertainty about the future. Sexual harassment is an abuse of power, and can increase when work stability is threatened. Working in isolation also increases a worker's vulnerability to sexual harassment and can decrease the chances of reporting.

## Underreporting

Workers may be less likely to report sexual harassment for a number of reasons, including:

- Fear of retaliation disguised as layoffs
- Feeling unclear on what counts as workplace sexual harassment when working remotely

- Not knowing who to report to when HR is under-resourced, or unavailable
- Feelings of isolation and lack of support from peers
- A belief that harassment that occurs online, on the phone, or on social media is "not serious" enough to be reported.

## We Are All Responsible

Employers must develop effective policies that are responsive to the changing work environment. Workers should be given options for reporting and reminded that sexual harassment is not tolerated on any platform. Workers should be trained on new policies.

Supervisors should pay attention to workers and have oversight of digital workplace platforms. Regular check-ins help to reduce isolation and ensure workers are supported.

Workers should report sexual harassment that they witness or experience, and tell the harasser to stop if they feel safe in doing so. All employers and employees must behave appropriately.