

# End sexual harassment now!

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**Companies should have a "woman-friendly" policy to end sexual harassment in the workplace. Carolien Saayman reports**

**M**ary's boss pats her bum every time he walks past her. The foreman at Zodwa's factory loves to embarrass her by talking about sex in front of her. Jane's boss says they must meet outside the office to talk about her promotion.

Mary, Zodwa and Jane are among the many women who are victims of sexual harassment in the workplace.

In 1989, the Industrial Court defined sexual harassment as "unwanted sexual attention" - behaviour of a sexual nature that

is unwelcome and offensive to the person treated that way. Sexual harassment can include comments, suggestions or hints, gestures, fondling or touching without consent or by force. The worst form of sexual harassment is rape.

The ANC Women's League, together with Unisa's Centre for Women's Studies, the Institute for Personnel Management, the Institute of Directors and the Women's Bureau South Africa, recently carried out a survey on sexual harassment. The results of the survey showed that companies don't take the issue seriously. Only a few companies answered the survey questionnaires. Of these, just under 40 percent said they knew of sexual harassment in their organisations, but only 6.5 percent have a policy to deal with the problem.

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One of the reasons companies don't treat the issue of sexual harassment seriously is that very few women complain about it. Women interviewed in the survey said this was because they thought their employer would not do anything about it, they were afraid no one would believe them, or they would be laughed at or victimised.

When women did complain, people said the incident was "a joke". Sometimes the management did not want to do anything because the person guilty of harassment was in a senior position. In some cases the harasser was counselled, warned or disciplined. This proves something can be done.

The survey was done to help work out a policy for companies to deal with sexual harassment. Such a policy must say what will be done to a person who is guilty of this type of behaviour. Both men and women employees will then know their rights and responsibilities in the workplace.

Women must be the ones who work out the policy so it meets their needs and is "woman-friendly". But it will be hard work and take a long time before the workplace will become free of harassment. In the meantime, we need to empower ourselves and start challenging sexual harassment.

Here are some tips on what to do if you are harassed:

- The harasser counts on you being embarrassed and not saying anything. Don't be shy. You have the right to say so if someone offends you.

- Tell him you don't like it when he touches you or makes comments about the way you look. Be firm about it, not apologetic. Sometimes men don't realise they offend women. If we don't tell them, they will never know.

- If the harasser does not want to listen to reason, get a couple of women or even sympathetic men together and tell the harasser you know what he is doing and you will not put up with it any longer. In most cases he will be so embarrassed that he will stop harassing you.

- Organise a meeting of women employees, say, once a month. It does not have to be a formal meeting. It could just be a chance for women to talk about their complaints. If you have been harassed, you may blame yourself and wonder if you "invited" the harassment. Talking to other women employees will show you that you are not to blame - the harasser is. ☺

**You can get a booklet on how to develop a company policy on sexual harassment from the Institute of Directors. The booklet costs R7.00 plus R1.00 postage.**

**Write to: The Executive Director, Institute of Directors of Southern Africa, PO Box 908, Parklands 2121 or phone: (011) 648 8068.**

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