CAGE

Policy Brief

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Perceptions of Workplace Sexual Harassment and Support for Policy Action

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Summary

Workplace sexual harassment (SH) remains a significant challenge globally and in the UK, with substantial consequences for workers, employers, and the wider economy. New evidence from a large-scale UK study finds that nearly half of all women surveyed report having experienced workplace sexual harassment at some point in their careers, and that harassment generates significant mental health harms, productivity losses, absenteeism, and labour market exits. The research shows that victims rarely report incidents, often due to fears of retaliation and power imbalances. While public support exists for stronger action, support increases significantly when people receive information about weaknesses in current reporting, enforcement, and redress systems.

The findings from a survey of 6000 individuals suggest that policymakers should focus on improving the effectiveness of existing protections, strengthening enforcement mechanisms, protecting whistleblowers*, increasing accountability for employers, and improving access to justice for victims.

**From 6 April 2026, sexual harassment is explicitly listed as a standalone protected disclosure under UK whistleblowing law via the Employment Rights Act..*

Overview

The study arrives at a critical moment following the implementation of the Worker Protection Act (October 2024), which introduced a duty on employers to take reasonable steps to prevent workplace sexual harassment, and a **strengthening of these protections in the 2025 Employment Rights Act** which will come into force from 30th October 2026.

The evidence suggests these reforms are moving in the right direction but should be complemented by stronger enforcement mechanisms and greater support for victims.

Independent policy-driven research informed by history, culture and behaviour.

UKRI Economic and Social Research Council

The policy problem

The research identifies that although formal protections exist, fear of retaliation, power imbalances, limited legal knowledge, weak enforcement and costly redress discourage victims and witnesses from using them.

Low reporting should therefore not be interpreted as evidence of low incidence. It may instead reflect the perceived risks and costs of reporting.

Workplace sexual harassment imposes substantial costs on individuals and organisations. The study finds:

- 45% of women report experiencing workplace sexual harassment at some point in their careers.
- Among victims:
  - 39% report worse mental health.
  - 48% report reduced ability to perform their job.
  - 37% report increased absences.
- 6% report quitting their job.
- 46% of women say they would accept a 10% pay cut to avoid employment in a workplace where a recent harassment incident had occurred.

These findings demonstrate that workplace sexual harassment is not only an equality issue but also a productivity and economic growth issue.

What the evidence shows

Measurement must be transparent and consistent

The study demonstrates that the numerical estimate of prevalence is sensitive to how sexual harassment is defined. First, the study confirms earlier work in finding that a checklist of specified behaviours yields a higher estimate than a definition that is subjective by construction. Second, the study finds new evidence that estimates under the subjective definition may be sensitive to specifying moderators and to making explicit not only situations that constitute harassment, but also situations that do not. Both approaches capture important aspects of the problem, and be used to provide a range rather than a point estimate:

- a context-sensitive definition captures situations in which a specified conduct creates a harmful work environment, for instance, whether the person apologises and whether it is repeated;
- a behaviour checklist helps respondents recall specific incidents and may help them identify relevant conduct that they would otherwise not have labelled as harassment.

Policy implication: Government surveys and employer reporting should publish the definition, timeframe, sample selection and measurement method used. Trend comparisons should not combine estimates produced by materially different measures. It can be helpful to provide estimates using more than one definition.

What the evidence shows

Harassment is a productivity and labour-market issue

The reported effects extend beyond individual distress. Victims report poorer mental health, absence, reduced productivity and job exit. Women also demonstrate a willingness to trade up earnings for safer workplaces. These outcomes can reduce retention, constrain women's career choices and distort the allocation of talent.

Policy implication: Workplace harassment policy should be integrated into labour-market, productivity, occupational-health and equality strategies, not treated solely as an HR or conduct issue.

The reporting system is not trusted enough

Only 18% of women who identified as victims in the survey said that they reported sexual harassment to their employer. Fear of retaliation suppresses reporting: reporting was 26% among women who did not fear retaliation, compared with 11% among those who did.

The study finds that people substantially underestimate how satisfied reporters are with outcomes, and that they overestimate the role of career power imbalances. The study also identifies gaps in people's awareness of their rights. For instance, a quarter of all people did not know that their employer was liable for sexual harassment at work, and more than half incorrectly believed that they must prove harassment beyond reasonable doubt or that harassment can include unintentional behaviours. All of these misperceptions may contribute to low reporting.

Policy implication: Workplace harassment policy should be integrated into labour-market, productivity, occupational-health and equality strategies, not treated solely as an HR or conduct issue.

Information about prevalence and harms is less influential than information about institutional failure

Correcting beliefs about prevalence and harms changed beliefs but did not significantly change policy support or reporting- one reason being that, on average, people do not under-estimate prevalence or harms. By contrast, information about gaps in policy enforcement and redress increased support for policy action and willingness to report.

When asked to rank nine legislative policy priorities stated in the Kings Speech of 2024, participants place sexual harassment third, behind immigration and violent crime. The surveys elicited support for six policies including whistleblower protection, restriction of non-disclosure agreements in sexual harassment cases, and quotas for female managers. About 64 to 75% of people supported all policies other than quotas for female managers, which 44% supported. Overall, many people already support action as a matter of principle, but they are galvanized by information indicating why existing arrangements are insufficient in practice. The policy challenge is therefore not simply to make the problem more salient; it is to make the implementation gap visible and actionable.

What this means for employer sexual harassment policies

Workplace sexual harassment remains widespread and economically costly. Although many people already support stronger action, this research shows that public support grows most when people understand how existing protections fail victims. The UK's policy priority should therefore shift from raising awareness of the problem to improving the effectiveness of reporting, enforcement, and redress systems.

This study does not evaluate the effectiveness of alternative policies- in fact it sets out for survey respondents the potential pros and cons of each policy that is discussed. What this study contributes is a discussion of the policy landscape and responses from a large survey of UK citizens on the experiences of victims with the existing policy framework. It additionally provides evidence on how a wider set of people view specified policies relevant to sexual harassment.

Further information

- Sonia Bhalotra and Matthew Ridley 2026. Perceptions of Workplace Sexual Harassment and Support for Policy Action. Forthcoming, Journal of Political Economy, CAGE Working Paper No. 797/2026, University of Warwick

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