

The **Stuff Your Sexist Boss** doesn't want you to know



Solidarity Federation

The Law and its Limits

- 1 **Your legal situation**
- 2 **Problems with the legal approach**

Sexism at work

- 4 **You are not alone**
- 5 **What does sexism look like?**
- 5 **Unequal treatment**
- 6 **Objectification**
- 7 **Sexual harassment**
- 7 **Structural disadvantage**
- 8 **Microaggressions**

What to do about it

- 10 **Strategies, tactics, solidarity**
- 11 **Coping strategies**
- 12 **Tactics of resistance**

Solidarity and Support

- 18 **Mutual aid**
- 18 **Acts of Solidarity**
- 19 **Building Wider Support**

The Law and its Limits

Your legal situation

The UK does have a legal framework of protections for workers. It is illegal for an employer to discriminate against you because you're a woman or a trans person. This includes all employers, no matter how few people they employ. As a worker, whether you're an employee, an agency worker, a trainee, or self-employed, you have protection from sex discrimination at work under the Equality Act 2010. Sex discrimination can be direct (unequal treatment) or indirect (unequal rules or policies). It can also take the form of victimisation (hassling you, or people who support you, for complaining or taking action) or harassment (picking on you either occasionally or regularly because you're a woman or trans person).

If you're a transgender worker, you're protected too: the Equality act 2010 offers protections to people who have transitioned, are transitioning, or want to transition. The law recognises that not all transitions are

medical, and that transition is also a social process. This means you don't have to prove you've had certain kinds of medical treatment to qualify for protection.

If you are pregnant or adopting a child, your rights at work can include leave, pay, discrimination, unfair treatment and dismissal. You will need to notify your employer and prove your pregnancy or adoption process by a certain deadline.

Many of these rights depend on a number of factors, including your wage, the amount of time you have worked with an employer, and the type of work you're doing. The law is complex and you will need specialist legal advice to get help through the legal framework. It's one tool of many to stop sexism at work.

Problems with the legal approach

In practice, there are some limitations to using the law to challenge sexism in the workplace. The legal system is expensive and complex; recent changes in the law mean tribunals are even more difficult to

bring, and lawyers and judges often favour bosses as they share class interests. Not all workers are equal in the eyes of the law; different kinds of workers have different levels of legal protection. Bosses often have HR departments dedicated to protecting their interests, whereas workers struggle to get good legal advice.

Many workplaces rely fundamentally on sexist practice in ways the law doesn't account for. For example, there may be a rota system that makes it impossible to offer flexible hours, but the law only requires bosses to 'consider' a worker's request for flexible working. Many workers return from maternity or adoption leave to find their jobs changed or at risk, because workplaces are only legally obliged to offer 'equivalent' work to people returning from leave, not the same job.

Workers are often discouraged from seeking legal advice or understanding their legal position, and bosses victimise workers who do. Unions can help, but union membership is often discouraged at work and some union reps are also sexist. As anarcho-syndicalists we believe the best approach is

the one that strengthens solidarity in your workplace, and builds for the possibility of further action: empowering workers and weakening the bosses.

Sexism at work

You are not alone

If you are experiencing sexism at work you are not alone - it's very common. Recent research showed that 60% of women workers have experienced 'inappropriate' behaviour from a male colleague. 88% of transgender employees have experienced discrimination or harassment in their workplace. 14% of white women and 20-25% of women of colour have been asked about their plans for marriage and/or children at a job interview. The full-time gender pay gap is 15%, and the average part-time gender pay gap is 34.5%.

Around 30,000 people are sacked and 440,000 people lose out on pay or promotion every year, just because they're pregnant.

What does sexism look like?

Different kinds of workplaces can mean different experiences of sexism. This will depend on whether you are in full-time or part-time work; in a professional or unskilled job; work with lots of people, a few, or in isolation.

Working part time as a cleaner will mean you experience some different kinds of sexism than you would experience working as a nurse. Below are some of the forms that sexism in the workplace can take.

Unequal treatment

Sexism is unequal treatment on the basis of sex or gender. At work, unequal treatment can come in many forms: in the type of job you get offered, the work you're expected to do and the tasks you're given; in the lower pay you earn; in the unpaid work you're expected to do alongside your paid work; in the sexual harassment you experience from bosses, other workers, or clients. Sometimes, unequal treatment can be a blatant attempt to get you to leave.

"It's hard to explain. I just never got promoted, I never got any decent work, I got moved from site to site twice as often as anyone else. I was one of only 2 women in the whole company and the other woman was the boss' PA. They'd wheel me out to charm some horrible old client then put me back in my box again."

Objectification

Objectification at work can include bosses, workers and clients flirting with you; being asked to work especially closely with clients or bosses who fancy you; being expected to wear uniform or clothes that sexualise your body or gender you in ways you're not comfortable with; being expected to act flirtatiously or put up with sexual jokes or material at work. In some customer service jobs, such as bar work, waiting tables, or hospitality work, customers are quite likely to feel allowed to bother you.

"I worked in a bar with a really creepy boss. Whenever I bent down to fill up the fridge he would say 'while you're down there love...' and the men in the bar would laugh at how uncomfortable I got."

Sexual harassment

Sexual harassment is an abuse of power on the basis of your gender. It can be physical or psychological, or both; it can include inappropriate touching, comments or images, like being shown porn on your boss' phone.

Some bosses claim sexual harassment is 'part of the job'; working in bars or in sales this is fairly common.

People who sexually harass workers are aware of their power: for example, undocumented workers are often sexually harassed at work because those who harass them know they have little or no legal protection.

Structural disadvantage

Structural disadvantage at work happens when your workplace is set up in a way that doesn't work for your gender. For example, shifts starting too early and finishing too late for the school run, unpaid carers' leave meaning you can't afford to take a day off

when your kids are ill, or strict rotas meaning flexible work is impossible. Parenting is rarely shared equally and you may find that low wages, expensive childcare, and inflexible hours combine to mean serious structural disadvantage.

"I got offered a job which mentioned flexible working in the advert. When I asked about working early shifts so I could pick my daughter up from school, they said it was impossible. The pay wasn't enough to cover child care, so I had to turn it down and I got my benefits sanctioned for that. I'm still really angry."

Microaggressions

Microaggressions are the 'little things' that build up to mean you are having a bad time because of your gender. Like always being asked to clear away after meetings, or make the tea, or mop the floor at the end of the day. Or being asked constantly about your relationship, or clothes, or social life, when others aren't asked. Or persistently being interrupted or talked over, or your opinion being always worth less than other people's.

Microaggressions are hard to challenge on your own, because they're seen as insignificant. They build up into a general picture of disrespect and add to your stress at work. Microaggressions are so common (in wider society as well as at work) that they can have a negative impact on mental health and well-being. It is not only sexism that exposes you to this treatment; factors such as race, class and disability (and others) also have an influence. For example, maybe you're seen as the 'angry black woman' for speaking up at work; maybe you're teased about benefit scroungers because you're disabled; or maybe you've been asked to change your phone voice because it's 'chavvy'.

"I'm non binary and dress quite androgynous. I worked in a call centre and there was a lot of banter. My shift manager was the worst but people made comments constantly, it was awful. Eventually I got disciplined for taking long breaks and my dickhead manager cut my shifts down to nothing, I was on a zero hour contract. I couldn't pay my rent. It was just an awful time."

What to do about it

Strategies, tactics, solidarity

As anarcho-syndicalists we think that the responses that work best are direct, collective strategies that build and maintain a culture of resistance in your workplace. We encourage techniques that enable workers to regain control of their lives, disrupt the oppressor's agenda, minimise the possibility of escalation or retaliation, and create an outcome that changes the underlying structures of oppression at work. Coping strategies can allow you to deal with things on a personal level and tactics of resistance can help you to actively fight against unequal treatment, objectification, harassment and structural disadvantage. The tactics that work are neither passive nor aggressive; they are principled, assertive, strong, and self-respecting. It's also important to do small acts of solidarity that support other people in your workplace to fight against sexism, and to survive it even when they think they can't fight.

Coping strategies

Look after yourself

Sexism is not your fault, and it's not your responsibility. It's great if you can immediately confront the perpetrator and take control of the situation, but there's no need to feel guilty if you can't. Confrontation can be unsafe, especially alone. At this stage, coping is just as important as fighting.

Take a break if work is getting too much

Have some time alone to escape from the pressure. Take a sick day if you are able to. Remember mental health is important, and you shouldn't feel guilty for taking time off sick to look after yourself or recover.

Think about what happened, and how it made you feel

Experiences of sexism can be confusing and upsetting. Taking time to make sure you know how you feel about it can be a huge

help. Others might try to convince you that you are making a 'fuss over nothing,' or that it is 'all in your head'. Do not let them!

Communicate with those you trust

Take a moment to think about who is best at work, or in your life, to turn to in this situation. This doesn't have to be about taking action, but it's often really helpful having people at work or outside of it that you are comfortable talking to and that you can trust to understand and support you.

Tactics of resistance

Write down what happened

Try and write down the details as soon as possible after it happened. Write what was said and done, who said or did it, who else was there, and the time and date. Then write down how you felt. Even if you don't want to do anything about it now, this could be very important in the future, whether in establishing a pattern of sexist behaviour or practice, or in defending yourself and your

account of events. It will also help you to share experiences with others, or discover something that you thought was personal to you, is actually happening to them too. This record could be a journal, audio recordings, an email log, saved text messages, or any other way that's convenient and safe to do.

Gather evidence

There are many types of evidence: copies of emails, text messages, letters or other documents you think have sexist content; a diary of incidents/events; and pictures of sexist materials around the office.

Think about using a tape recorder or a mobile phone to record sexist comments and conversations. If you work for a public body, a Freedom of Information request (FOI) and/or Subject Access request can help you find out what you need to know. It doesn't have to be you that makes these requests - it can be any member of the public.

Keep material at home rather than in the workplace. Forward relevant work emails to your personal account - your employer

can suddenly stop your work email access. Download relevant policy documents; bosses often try to change policies if they discover you are thinking of taking action. If you are called in for a disciplinary, or even an 'informal' chat by management, be wary. Think about trying to record the meeting.

Remember you have the right to be accompanied by a trusted person, union rep or other advocate at the meeting: use it! Keep a record of any time your employer tries to deny you your right to be accompanied.

Figure out who your friends are

Many people feel too isolated to take action about workplace sexism. It is worth thinking about who would and wouldn't support you in your workplace. Are there people who have had similar experiences to you?

What are the relationships in your workplace like? If you want things to change, it's worth thinking about how you build a shared understanding - first between a small number of trusted people, then gradually,

as you grow in confidence, among a wider group. Try sharing sexist experiences you've had, then start sharing potentially effective ways of resisting and challenging them.

Have a meeting about what to do next

A good way of working out your strategy is to arrange a meeting with a small number of people you trust who are supportive of you and/or experiencing similar problems. Take time to talk about what has happened to you, and how it has affected you. Ask if others have similar experiences and how they dealt with them. Don't talk about this using your work email account or text from work phones - your employer will be able to access these if they want to. Try to arrange the meeting in a safe environment away from bosses or sexist colleagues. If it feels appropriate, start to think about how best you can oppose sexism, what you want, and how you want to get it.

Establish limits and make demands

Once you have agreed a collective approach,

confront the behaviour. Confrontation involves naming the behaviour and demanding a resolution. Let your boss or colleagues know that you, your workmates, your friends, are unhappy with your treatment. Confront them with their behaviour and establish your opposition.

When possible it is good to do this collectively. This will allow you to make your voice heard and ensure your boss or colleague has to listen. Decide what demands you wish to make, and present them as non-negotiable.

Name the behaviour clearly and make honest, direct statements. Make it plain that workers have the right to be free from harassment or discrimination and stick to your own agenda.

Reinforce your statements with strong body language, respond at the appropriate level and end the confrontation on your own terms. Explain that if they do not listen to your demands you will have to escalate. At this point your boss or colleague may even concede defeat.

Fight back, retaliate, and escalate

If your boss or colleague doesn't budge, you can work together to find ways of making work more difficult for them. Slowing down, refusing to socialise, and calling out behaviour are all forms of retaliation that can be effective. You could get friends to organise a picket or a boycott, or even go on strike. You might also decide to make an official complaint. It is important to think about your limits, and comfort zones before escalating.

Do not feel obliged to commit to anything that makes you feel vulnerable or unsafe. Plan your course of action based on what you feel able to do.

Solidarity and Support

Mutual aid

It's not always going to feel possible to directly confront sexism at work. But even when that's the case, there is still a lot you can do to make work more bearable and undermine sexist behaviour. The support you give others will help foster respect, unity and strength. This is especially important because sexist colleagues reach out to sexist bosses for support - and they often get it. Building a culture of solidarity and support at work will mean you and others experiencing sexism are less alone and more likely to win.

Acts of solidarity

There are lots of small but significant acts of solidarity that can help tackle sexism in the workplace. This can involve offering (or not offering) to do certain jobs yourself, like making the tea, or getting the paper for the photocopier. Or you might put up a cleaning rota so that it's not left to the same people to do every time.

Offer practical support with things like flexible working to support childcare: it's a lot harder for bosses to say no to requests for flexible hours if they're supported by other workers. Watch out for 'divide and rule' tactics around maternity or adoption leave - very often this is used as a way of reallocating work unfairly, or reducing terms and conditions when the worker comes back from leave, and this has implications for all workers. Stay in touch with the worker on leave and let them know what's going on.

When you see other workers experiencing sexist behaviour, especially sexual harassment, reach out to them privately, through texts or direct messages, if it's not safe to talk openly. Let them know you think the sexist behaviour is unacceptable. Ask them how they're doing and if they want to talk about it sometime away from work.

Building wider support

Try to offer support to any workers in other kinds of struggles or grievances; this will build support across the workforce and help people realise you share interests.

For example: in a restaurant try supporting waiting staff in asking for their share of tips, better breaks, or safer or more comfortable working environment etc.

This struggle will make you and your colleagues realise your potential for resisting management by working together, and potentially transform your roles and relationships to each other within the workplace.

You can find our up-to-date library of links and resources on this topic at:

<http://solfed.org.uk/sysb>

Contact us for free leaflets & more info and/or information about Solidarity Federation:

<http://www.solfed.org.uk>

About us

The Solidarity Federation is an anarcho-syndicalist union, a means for people seeking to improve our lives to organise in our workplaces and communities. Solfed brings together people in all occupations regardless of industry, craft or trade – whether we're employed or not.

Solfed seeks the abolition of capitalism and the institutions of power that are associated with it, such as the state. Our goal is to create a society centred on needs rather than profit, based upon the principle 'from each according to ability, to each according to need'.

We believe in the principle of direct action – that means doing something for ourselves and not expecting leaders or representatives to act on our behalf.

We oppose all forms of oppression, discrimination and exploitation. The way we organise reflects the free society that we want to create: one based on voluntary association, democratic participation and workers' self-management.



YOU ARE NOT ALONE!

Sexism is a constant presence in many workplaces where it can take many forms. From lower pay, to expectations of unpaid work, to sexual harassment by bosses, other workers or customers, sexism means women and workers seen as women are treated unequally on the basis of sex or gender.

This pamphlet looks at the reality of sexism in the workplace and what we can do about it. As anarcho-syndicalists we favour direct, collective strategies that build and maintain a culture of resistance in the workplace. We consider how workers can directly confront sexism or cope when confrontation is not possible, building a culture of solidarity and support at work, which ultimately means you and others experiencing sexism are less isolated and more likely to win.

