



Solidarity against Sexism on the Shop Floor



by Angel Gardner



If there is anything that I have learned from working in the restaurant and retail industry for over 14 years, it is that sexual harassment and sexism in the workplace is an issue that has not gone away. Perhaps you have become more tolerant of being sexually objectified. Maybe you are afraid that being uncomfortable with sexual advances or comments means that you are a prude or hopelessly outdated. The reality is that sexual harassment and sexism are all about power. We feel uncomfortable about standing up for ourselves in these situations because to do so questions power relations; not only in the workplace, but in society in general.

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Is it sexual harassment or sexism in the workplace?

- * A district manager asks you and your 40-year old female co-worker, “Will you girls make us some coffee for our meeting?”
- * Your manager makes all the women in the workplace wear tight baby doll t-shirts which are intentionally a size too small that say, “For a Good Time Call ...” while the men are told to wear plain black polo shirts that do not have to be form-fitting.
- * During your training at a retail clothing store, you are told to flirt with potential customers to make sales. You feel uncomfortable with this and despite your efforts to be proactive about sales in a professional way, you are pulled aside later for not being “friendly enough.”
- * A conventionally-attractive regular customer often sits at the bar and stares at you throughout your shift and has made several comments about your appearance that make you uncomfortable. When you tell him to stop, he says that you should be flattered. Your boss fails to act and your other co-workers, who appreciate his attention, tell you that you are strange for not liking it.

The answer: If any of these policies, attitudes or behavior makes you feel uncomfortable, then you should not have to deal with it. Everyone's comfort level is different. Some of your co-workers might not mind being called "girl" or "sweetie," while others may take offense to being referred to as a "woman" or by any gender-specific pronoun. Different expectations for employee uniforms that force co-workers into stereotyped gender roles are sexist practices that create a potentially hostile workplace. Flirting with customers should never be a given, but a choice. Some people may find that they like the attention and get better tips by flaunting their appearance and flirting, but not everyone should have to interact in a similar fashion. Berating others for what makes them uncomfortable promotes an environment of harassment.

So you feel like a policy or an individual at work is creating a hostile work environment?

Going the legal route is not always the best or solitary option. Collectively standing up together with your co-workers against sexist practices, policies or individuals can often be the safest and most powerful way to fight. Though it is technically illegal, it is easier for companies to retaliate against an individual than a group of workers. In addition, sexual harassment cases often result in companies dragging women through the mud and can prove to be very traumatic for the victim. Legal processes can take a long time to resolve, but taking direct action in your workplace is immediate. When workers come together to fight sexual harassment and sexism, we are empowered by taking back the workplace and at the same time, form closer bonds with our co-workers by building mutual trust and respect for one another.

How do I fight sexism and harassment in my workplace?

- * Form a coalition with co-workers who share and/or are sympathetic to your concerns. Sexual harassment affects union and non-union members alike, so do not exclude any possible allies.
- * Ban customers and clients who are repeat offenders from the store and make sure that the ban is being enforced by the rest of your co-workers.
- * Confront your boss as a group about sexual harassment issues (perhaps even a definition) and make it known that you take it very seriously and so should they.
- * Confront workers who refuse to support their fellow workers when they feel harassed, violated, or uncomfortable. Have one-on-one conversations about the impact of their actions (not respecting boundaries) and words ("it's not a big deal"), and express your feelings in a genuine, but professional manner.
- * Any policy, dress code, or expectations that fellow workers find to be sexist should be addressed, regardless of whether or not you've reached consensus. If you are required by your job to wear a tight baby doll t-shirt, but men can wear polos, you should also be able to wear polo, if you do not want to wear the t-shirt.