

Discrimination Sexual Harassment at Work

Usdaw

Campaigning
For Equality



Survey Results



Foreword

Usdaw

**Campaigning
For Equality**



Over the last year Usdaw has been finding out more about workers' experiences of sexual harassment in retail, distribution and food manufacturing industries. Most of our members are women working in these sectors, in large supermarkets, convenience stores and warehouses.

This work emerged out of a growing awareness that for too many workers, particularly those in customer facing environments, sexual harassment is a problem that is not going away.

In companies where we have trade union recognition, Usdaw has been able to negotiate dignity at work and sexual harassment agreements with employers. But far too many women are reporting that sexual harassment remains a significant area of concern for them at work.

We wanted to find out more and so Usdaw has been running a Sexual Harassment Survey together with get-togethers of women members; this has enabled us to listen to the voices of hundreds of women workers. This report describes their experiences.

During the course of this work revelations about powerful figures in the film, television and other industries as well as politicians in Westminster and beyond have emerged. Whilst this report may not garner the same headlines, the experiences of women working in key sectors of the UK economy such as retail, call centres and manufacturing are vitally important to any understanding of sexual harassment and to our efforts to tackle it.

These revelations have given fresh impetus to our efforts to give women working in some of the most important sectors of the UK economy, a voice.

Thank you to those members who have been willing to share their experiences and made this report possible.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Paddy Lillis". The signature is fluid and cursive, written in a professional style.

Paddy Lillis
General Secretary

Introduction

Sexual harassment is a persistent and a widespread problem.

Numerous studies show that the majority of women will experience sexual harassment and that women are far more likely to experience sexual harassment than men.

For this reason, and the fact that Usdaw is a Union with a majority of women members, this report focuses on the experience of women. The experiences of men are important and are addressed elsewhere in other studies.

Sexual harassment does not just happen in Hollywood or Westminster. One of the challenges facing trade unions and other campaigners on this issue is to ensure that the voices of working women right across the UK are heard no matter where they work. Unions have a vital role to play in speaking up for women who because they work part-time, on insecure contracts or low hours contracts have relatively little labour market power and so less of a voice.

Udaw represents women working in the retail sector, call centres and manufacturing and this report gives voice to their experience of sexual harassment.



Summary of main findings

The majority of women in Usdaw – 7 out of 10 – have experienced sexual harassment at some point in their working lives.

Overall 6 out of 10 women have experienced sexual harassment in the last 12 months.

9 out of 10 young women have experienced sexual harassment in the last 12 months.

For most women sexual harassment consists of banter, so called jokes and remarks about their physical appearance.

Nearly 1 in every 10 women has experienced sexual assault.

For most women sexual harassment happens at work.

Most women did not tell their employer about the harassment.

Who took part

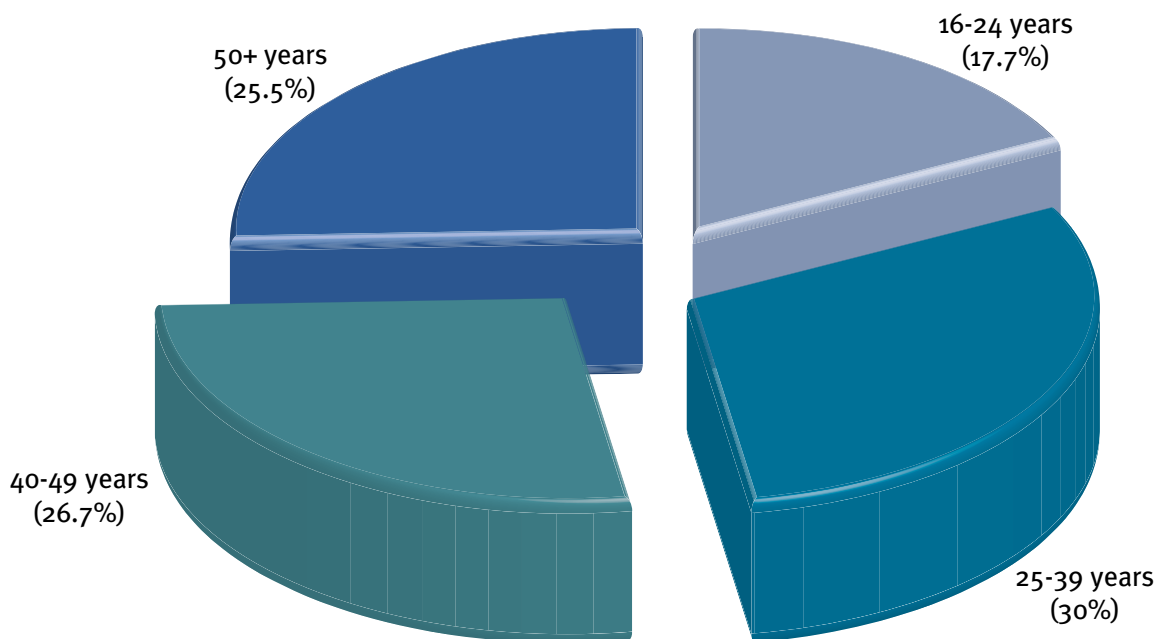
Our survey had over 500 responses and the majority of respondents were women – almost three quarters. The survey was circulated to men and women and was also available online. The fact that 70% of respondents were women, suggests that they saw the issue as more relevant to their lives.

We also held two get-togethers of women members, one in Leeds and one in Manchester and around 25 women took part in each.

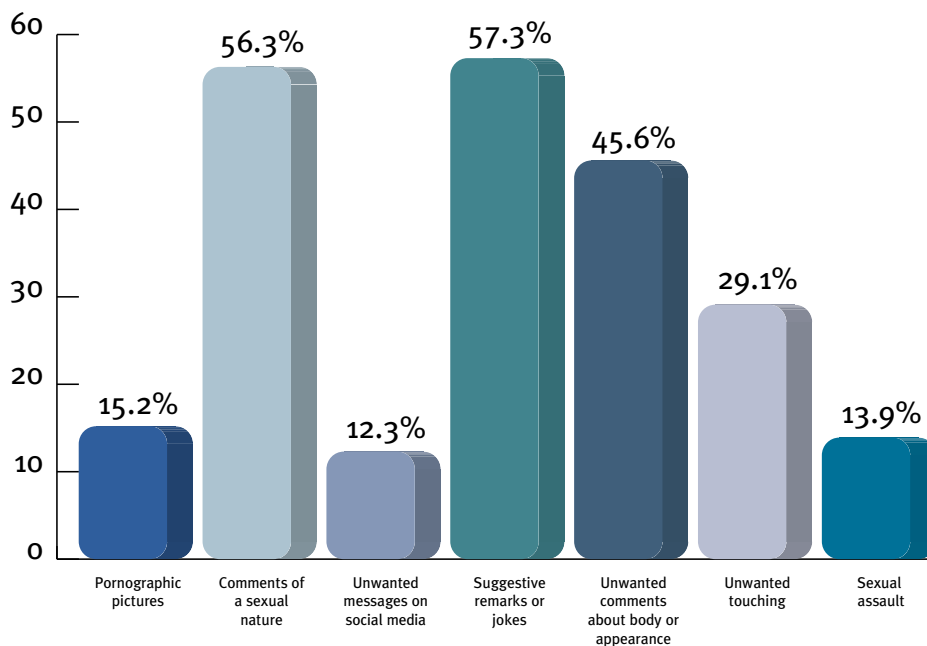
Women make up the majority of the workforce in the retail sector and the majority of Usdaw's members are women.

Members and non-members from across all ranges responded to the survey. Almost a third were aged between 25 and 39.

The graph below shows the age profile of respondents.



The graph below shows the numbers of women experiencing harassment in the last 12 months and the form the harassment took.



Jokes and banter

1 in 2 women (a worrying 57.3%) who responded to the Union's survey had either experienced or witnessed suggestive remarks or jokes.

The view that sexual harassment is just a joke or that women who are upset or offended by it lack a sense of humour, is still widespread. Many of the women who responded to our survey or came to an Usdaw get-together shared their experiences of how hard it can be to get colleagues or managers to take sexual harassment seriously.

Comments like 'he doesn't mean anything by it', 'that's just his way' or 'can't you take a joke' are common.

"When I first started working in my store we had to wear jackets that said we were happy to help. On several occasions customers asked me how far I would go to help them – one man said would I help him in the bedroom."

One Usdaw rep said:

"We had a young worker who was cleaning the floor and a male customer made the remark 'I know something else you could be doing on your knees'. The girl was horrified. I quickly got the duty manager down and had the customer removed from the store."

Another woman told us she was bending down in the warehouse when a male colleague came in and said "just think what I could do to you right now". The member didn't find this funny – "I felt embarrassed and uneasy".

Very often a comment or remark may be intended as a joke and a woman at work may choose to go along with it, may find it funny or may decide not to challenge it even though it has made them feel uncomfortable. This can make measuring the extent of sexual harassment difficult because perceptions of sexual harassment vary from person to person. Nonetheless telling a woman that she should laugh off a remark or that she is over-sensitive misses the point – we are not all the same and it is for each woman to decide where she draws the line.

In many shops and stores the attitude still prevails that the customer is always right, an approach which is of little help to shopworkers regularly exposed to sexual harassment at work.

Many women who responded to our survey described the impact this kind of ongoing banter has on them at work. Women feel undervalued, demoralised and isolated. Several women spoke about the damaging drip drip effect of being exposed to banter and 'jokes' day-in-day out.

The law makes it clear that the intention of the person making the remark is not as important as the effect the remark has on the person on the receiving end. The fact that a person might attempt to excuse their behaviour by saying that it was only meant as a joke is not a legal defence in a sexual harassment case.



Comments about appearance

The women who responded to our survey or came to an Usdaw get-together were not describing compliments about their hair or clothes but rather comments from customers and colleagues that made them feel uncomfortable and embarrassed.

“If I am going to be working with that man I won’t wear certain clothes or shoes and will feel like I have to cover myself up as much as I can.”

“I was told that the new uniform made it easier for men at work to see my breasts.”

“Some of the men at my workplace are always commenting on my body and what I am wearing. It makes me feel really uncomfortable and so I always think about what to wear so I don’t attract attention and I try not to join in conversations so I don’t draw attention to myself.”

These comments describe a workplace culture where women are regarded as public property and where comments about their bodies are commonplace and something women are expected to put up with.

1 in every 2 women who responded to the survey had experienced unwanted comments of a sexual nature in the last 12 months or unwanted comments about their body or appearance.



LGBT workers

For many of our LGBT members sexual harassment took the form of intrusive and offensive questions about their sex life and/or body.

“Several years ago I transitioned from female to male and got constant questions most days from colleagues about my body – what genitals did I have, what did my body look like etc, I felt embarrassed and upset. When I complained to my manager they said well people are curious and bound to talk. They did nothing to help.”

A gay man told us that he asked a manager to help him look after a customer who had collapsed in the toilets at work and *“the manager made it clear that he was unwilling to go into the toilets with me as I am a gay man.”*



Physical contact

Unwanted physical contact is a recurring problem for many of the women we spoke to.

“We have a customer who whenever he comes into the store will always touch you and asks you to help him find things. He makes me feel really uncomfortable and I try to avoid him but can’t always. I mentioned him to the other women at work and they said oh you mean Mr Touchy Feely yes we all know about him. When it next happened I challenged the customer and he responded by telling me not to get above myself.”

“Another colleague came up behind me and tickled me, he managed to grope me at the same time. I complained to the manager but he just laughed”

“I was involved in a sexual harassment issue involving a drunk customer.....he was sitting at the chairs in the store and I went over to see if he was OK. He made a crude remark about the size of my chest and grabbed them. I jumped back and was really upset. Our security guard found it funny and made a sexist remark. The security guard was reprimanded for his remarks and lack of support in this situation.”



Most studies into sexual harassment would class unwanted touching of the breasts, buttocks or genitals or attempts to kiss a woman as sexual assault, a serious and yet common experience for many of the women who shared their experiences with us. More than 4 out of every 10 women who responded to our survey has experienced either unwanted touching or sexual assault in the last 12 months.



Mobile phones

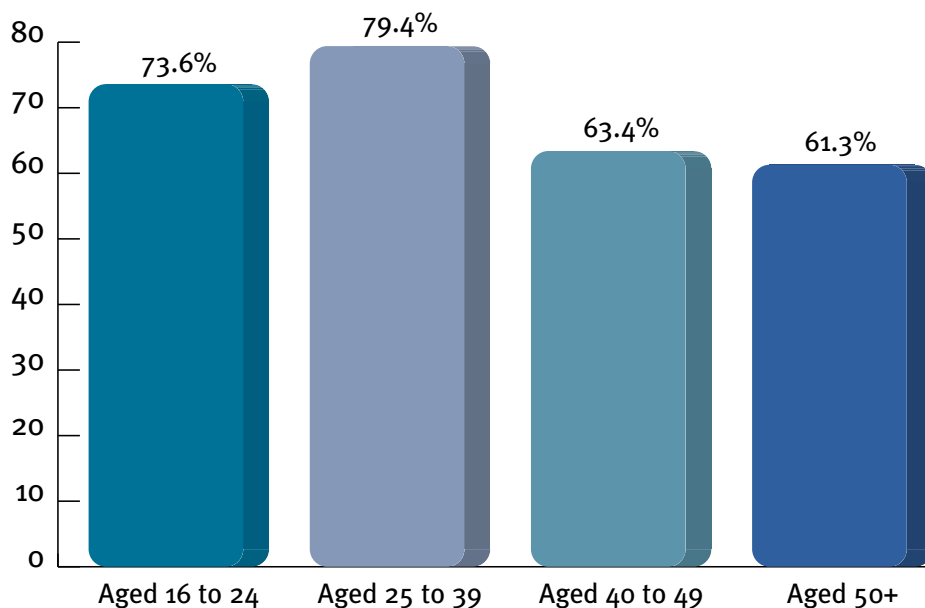
Our members told us about being exposed to pornographic images which other colleagues are viewing or sharing on their phones and about receiving unwanted and offensive text messages.

Staff break times can be a source of concern when many colleagues will be using their phones – *“you might be on a different table but all it takes is for you to move your eyes across the room and you see it.”*

One young woman working in a supermarket received a series of increasingly offensive text messages from a manager and when she complained he began bullying her.

Young women

The graph below shows the percentage of women who have experienced harassment in the last 12 months by age.



Our survey has shown that young women are at particular risk of sexual harassment. Almost three quarters (73.6%) of women aged 16 to 24 had experienced harassment in the last 12 months. For women aged 25 to 39 this figure rose to almost 79.4% – that is almost 8 out of 10 women. This is consistent with the findings of several other studies including the TUC’s recent report *Still Just a Bit of Banter?* which found that age appears to be a factor in sexual harassment.

One Usdaw rep told us about an older male colleague who made sexually explicit remarks to young women workers on a regular basis. This was often done in front of customers – women felt embarrassed and upset. *“His excuse was that it was just banter – that’s always the excuse. But it was offensive and shocking and no-one found it funny”*.

In most industries including retail, younger workers are more likely to be working on low hours, part-time and insecure contracts and to know less about their rights than older workers. This undoubtedly places them in a more vulnerable position; workers on temporary and low hours contracts believe they will not be offered more work or more hours if they ‘kick up a fuss’.

The proportion of young workers who are underemployed is more than double the percentage of any other age group. Underemployed workers are those people who have jobs but want to work more hours than they currently do. Young workers have consistently been twice as likely to be underemployed than workers in general, meaning they are more dependent on the good will of their manager to get the additional hours they need.

In this sense younger workers and young women in particular have less labour market power and therefore less of a voice when it comes to speaking up about sexual harassment. Other studies have found a link between insecure work and sexual harassment. The EU Agency for Fundamental Rights noted that women with irregular or precarious employment contracts which are common for many jobs in the services sector, are more susceptible to sexual harassment.

Trade Unions are well placed to reach out to young workers because, by definition, unions provide an opportunity for working people to come together and have a voice at work.



Reporting sexual harassment

Our survey found that the vast majority of women – two-thirds – did not report the sexual harassment to their employer. Of those that did report the harassment the majority – almost 7 out of 10 women – were either unhappy with the response or felt that nothing had changed. This is consistent with the findings of other surveys and research projects.

Many women never report harassment because they fear they won't be believed or because sexual harassment at work is not taken seriously and so they will be told to laugh it off.

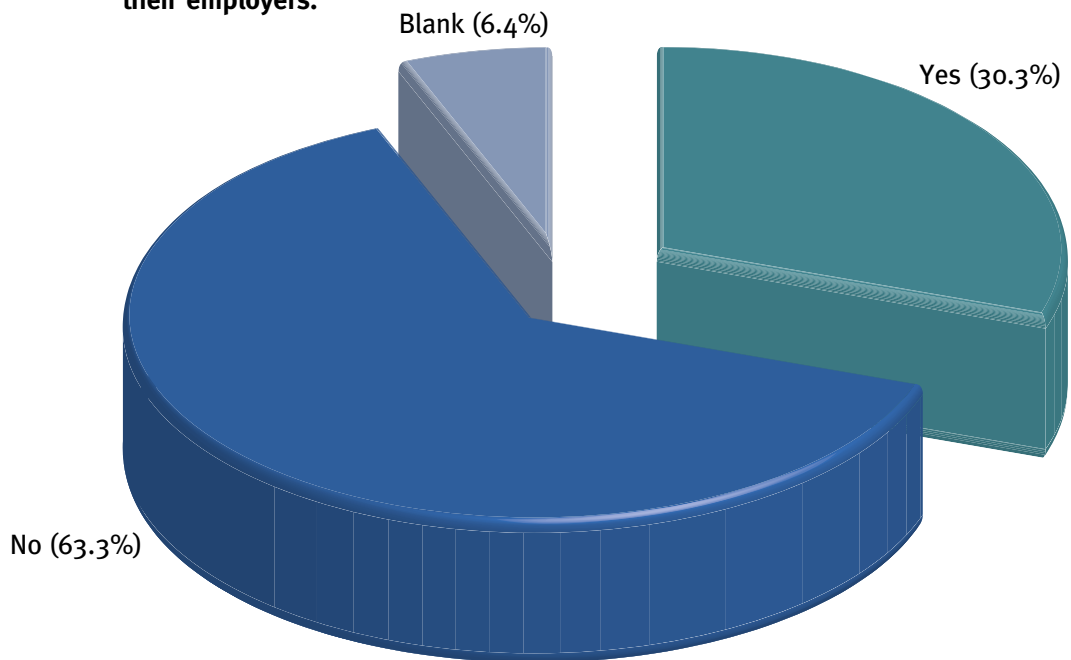
Many women told us they did not report the harassment because they worried this would make things difficult for them at work. Women who shared their stories with us asked to remain anonymous for the same reason. One member who had been sexually assaulted at work said; *"please don't mention my name as I don't want a backlash at work"*.

Another said *"I feel like the only solution is to leave my job"*.

Another member said she could only agree to appear in the report if we could guarantee that she could not be identified.

Also of concern is the fact that so few respondents – less than a third (30.3%) – said they were happy with the response of their employer if they did report the harassment. We came across many instances of employers and union reps working together to support women experiencing sexual harassment but our survey suggests that there are still too many workplaces where it is not being taken seriously.

The graph below shows the percentage of women reporting harassment to their employers.

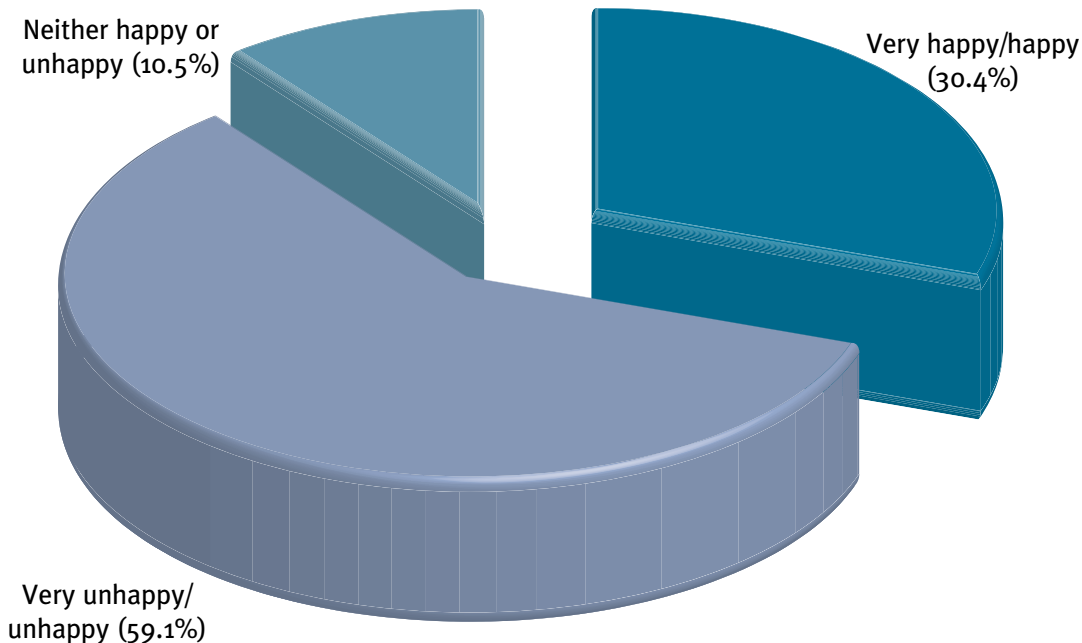




When members do complain all too often management's response is to move the member not the harasser. One Usdaw rep said "What kind of

signal does this send to other members and how do we encourage them to speak up if they feel they will be punished by being moved?"

The graph below shows the percentage of women who are happy with their employer's response to complaints of harassment.



By contrast when women report sexual harassment to the Union the majority – almost two-thirds – are happy with the response they get. Women may initially just want to talk to their Usdaw rep and be reassured that they will be supported if they decide to pursue their complaint. Usdaw lay representatives and where necessary full time officials will advise and represent members who have experienced

sexual harassment and ensure that women are not on their own. Our members say that having someone on their side, who believed them and helped to speak up for them made all the difference. Our challenge is to ensure that every member who reports sexual harassment to the Union is happy with our response.

Action on sexual harassment

This report highlights some clear and pressing steps that unions and employers can take to address the problem of sexual harassment at work.

To encourage more women to report sexual harassment we will produce new materials including leaflets, posters and an information card setting out what sexual harassment is and making it clear we take the issue seriously.

To help create workplaces free from sexual harassment we will support Usdaw reps who want to run workplace campaigns on the issue by ensuring they have the support and resources they need including a survey so that they can find out more about the nature and scale of the problem in their workplaces. A distinguishing characteristic of harassment is the reluctance of those who

experience it or witness it to come forward. An absence of complaints does not necessarily mean an absence of harassment. To address the under reporting of sexual harassment we will raise with employers the need for managers to be better trained and supported to respond to the issue and ensure joint agreements on the issue are fit for purpose.

To ensure members receive the right support from the Union we will ensure our reps are trained and equipped to understand sexual harassment.

To promote discussion about sexual harassment and why it matters we will raise awareness of this report and of the survey findings at Union events and within the wider trade union movement.





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