



Sexual harassment in defence survey

A Prospect briefing • February 2024

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Key findings

This is a report of the findings from an online survey circulated to female Prospect members working in the defence sector. The survey was launched following the publication of a letter by sixty senior women to the Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Defence (MoD) that alleges sexual assault, harassment, and abuse by male colleagues. These testimonies have been supported by Prospect members working in defence sector. The purpose of the survey is to provide a space for members to share their accounts of sexual harassment while working in the defence industry.

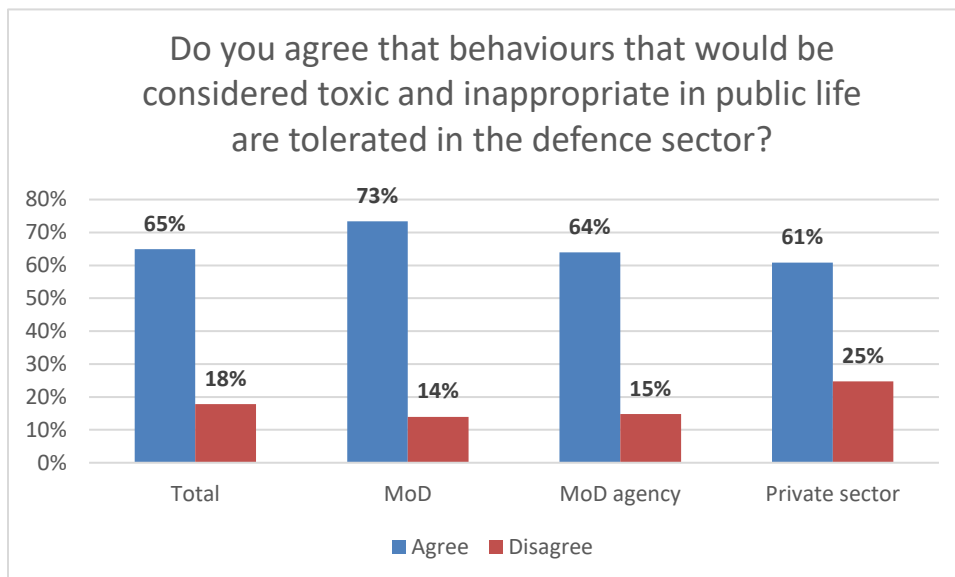
There were 308 responses, 79 respondents work for the MoD, 122 for a MoD agency or some other arm's length public sector organisation, and 97 work for private sector organisations. The findings have been aggregated so that individuals cannot be identified.

The survey confirms that there is widespread evidence of sexual harassment and unwanted behaviours in the defence sector. Nearly two thirds agree that behaviours that would be considered toxic in public life are tolerated in the defence sector. Respondents working for the MoD were more likely to report a toxic work environment.

- Nearly 60% of respondents have personally been sexually harassed, a similar proportion have witnessed unwanted behaviours.
- Three quarters have experienced or witnessed sexual harassment at least once a month in the last year.
- Respondents have little confidence in the actions taken by their employers to deter sexual harassment. Members working for the MoD have the least confidence, with nearly 60% saying they are not confident.
- Nearly a third of respondents (32%) have experienced direct touching, one in five have received unwanted messages by text or email (19%), and nearly one in ten have been sexually assaulted (7%).
- Most sexual harassment is by a work colleague (46%), and the most common place for incidents to happen is at work (75%). Often sexual harassment includes several work colleagues (42%), which suggests that these behaviours are endemic within the sector.
- Civilian staff working with military personnel are likely to be on the receiving end of the toxic culture prevalent in the armed forces, 45% of respondents working for the MoD have been sexually harassed by someone in a military grade.
- More than a third of those commenting on actions taken to deter sexual harassment say that their employer has not taken any noticeable action. Only 22% are confident that a complaint of sexual harassment will be properly investigated, and only 33% think that complaints will be dealt with satisfactorily.
- Actions that employers could take to improve confidence include taking complaints seriously, providing an independent reporting tool, providing clearer signposting of complaints procedures, employing more female leaders, ensuring there is greater integrity and leadership within defence organisations, encouraging open discussions that encourage women to report, and to ensure there is no victim blaming.
- A majority of respondents (51%) have confidence in seeking support from a Prospect union representative. Suggestions for improvement include making it clear that the union will take the issue seriously, making the union's process for reporting and dealing with cases clearer, appointing more female representatives and publishing examples of cases that have been successfully dealt with by the union.

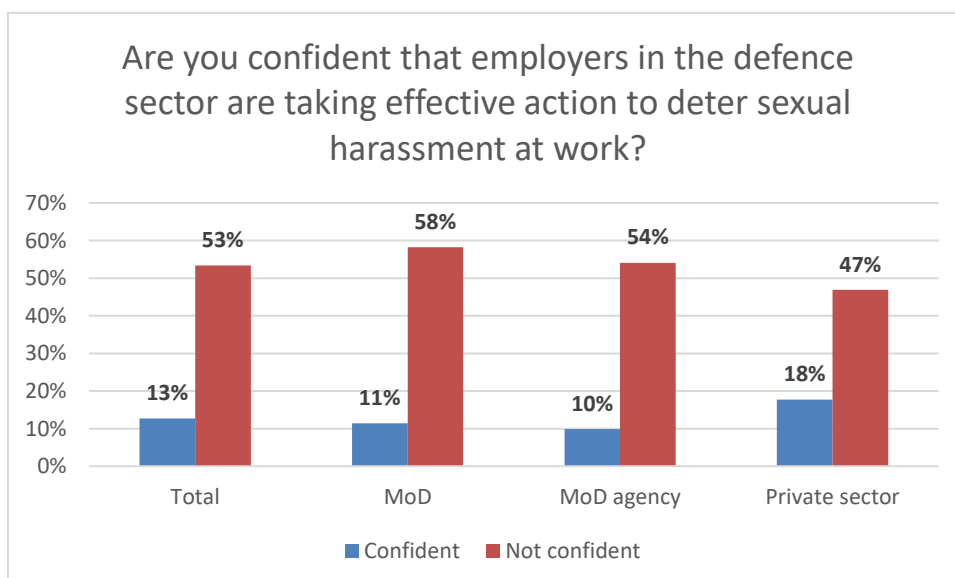
Evidence of sexual harassment in defence sector

The survey confirms that there is widespread evidence of sexual harassment and unwanted behaviours in the defence sector. Nearly two thirds agree that behaviours that would be considered toxic in public life are tolerated in the defence sector. Respondents working for the MoD are more likely to report a toxic work environment.



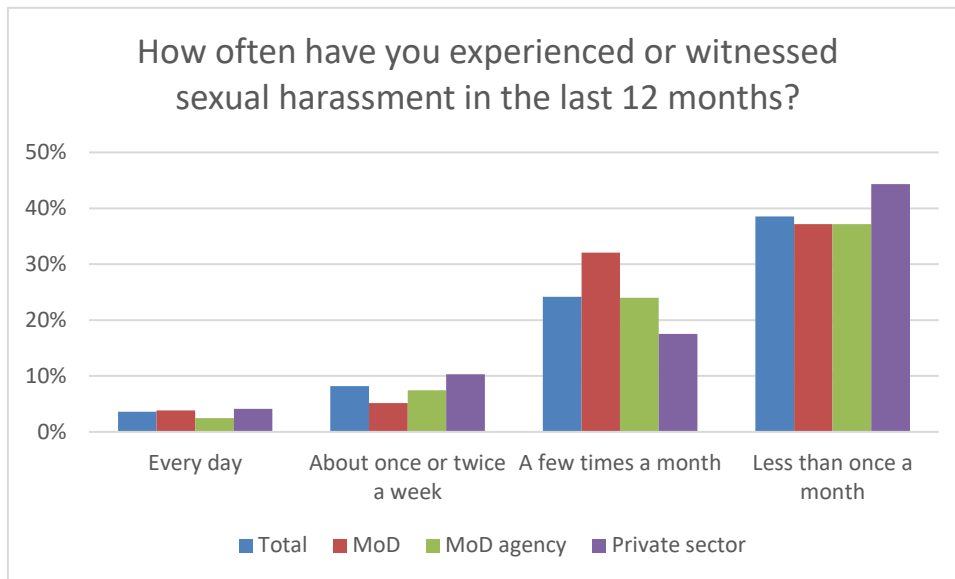
Nearly 60% of respondents have personally been sexual harassed, 61% in the MoD, 60% in MoD agencies and 48% of those working for private sector organisations. A similar proportion have witnessed unwanted behaviours; 61% of MoD respondents, 57% MoD agencies and 65% of private sector respondents. These results show that the problem is widespread confirming the testimonies of senior female leaders in the MoD.

Respondents have little confidence in the actions taken by their employers to deter sexual harassment. Members working for the MoD have the least confidence, with nearly 60% saying they are not confident.



Incidents of sexual harassment that create a toxic work culture are frequent. Three quarters of respondents have experienced or witnessed sexual harassment at least once a month in

the last year. There are some differences by employer type, 10% of respondents working in the private sector have experienced unwanted behaviours once or twice a week, and 32% of MoD respondents have been sexually harassed or witnessed harassment a few times a month.



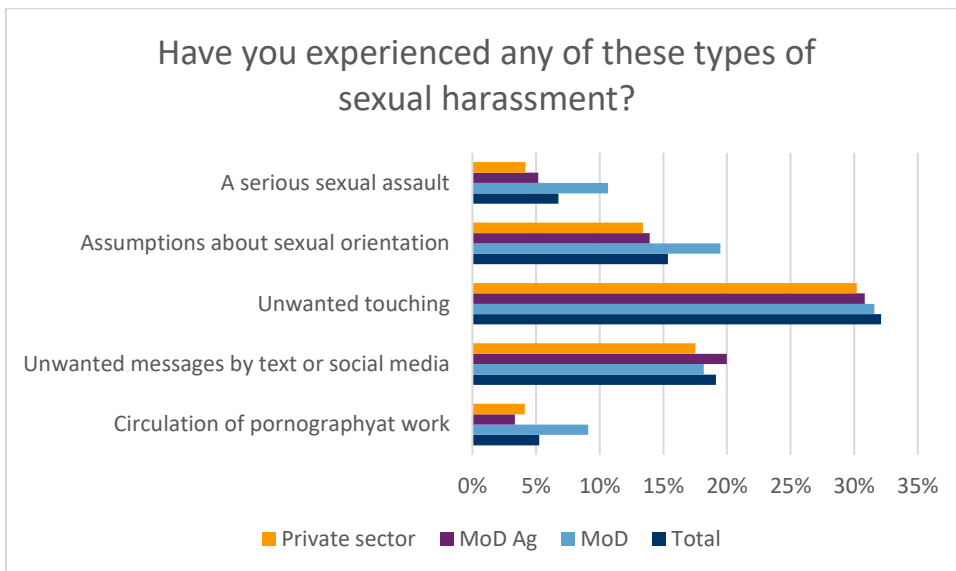
What types of sexual harassment

The kind of harassment that respondents regularly experience include suggestive remarks (47%), comments about their body or appearance (46%), comments of sexual nature (41%), assumptions about private life (38%) and offensive comments about appearance (38%). In addition, more than half of respondents have to deal with assumptions about their capabilities (53%). Overall, the results by sector are similar, but there is a pronounced difference in the assumptions about capabilities between MoD respondents (64%) and those working for MoD agencies (51%) and the private sector (44%).

Nearly a third of respondents (32%) experience direct touching, one in five receive unwanted messages by text or email (19%) and nearly one in ten have been sexually assaulted (7%). The likelihood of these types of harassment are similar in all types of organisation. Respondents working for the MoD are most likely to say that they have been sexually assaulted (11%).

A significant proportion of respondents (15%) have assumptions made about their sexual orientation, as with other behaviours respondents working for the MoD are the most likely to directly experience this type of unwanted behaviour (20%).

Nearly half of respondents have witnessed some of these different unwanted behaviours. So even if respondents have not been on the direct receiving end of a suggestive comments, offensive remarks or comments of a sexual nature, it is likely that they will have witnessed these behaviours. As before, MoD respondents are the most likely to work in an environment where these type of comments are common. A smaller proportion of respondents have witnessed unwanted touching (22%) or noticed comments about someone's appearance or body (32%). Assumptions about sexual orientation are common within all types of organisation (44%).



Who is responsible for sexual harassment and where did it happen?

Most sexual harassment is by a work colleague (46%) and the most common place for it to happen is at work (75%). Often sexual harassment includes several work colleagues (42%), which suggests that these behaviours are endemic within the workplace.

Over 40% of respondents working for the MoD (45%) have been sexually harassed by someone in a military grade. The proportions in MoD agencies (18%) and private sector (15%) are lower, this may be because there is less interaction with military staff. The extent of the problem of sexual harassment in the armed forces has been well documented.¹ What this survey shows is that civilian staff working with military personnel are likely to be on the receiving end of the toxic culture prevalent in the armed forces.

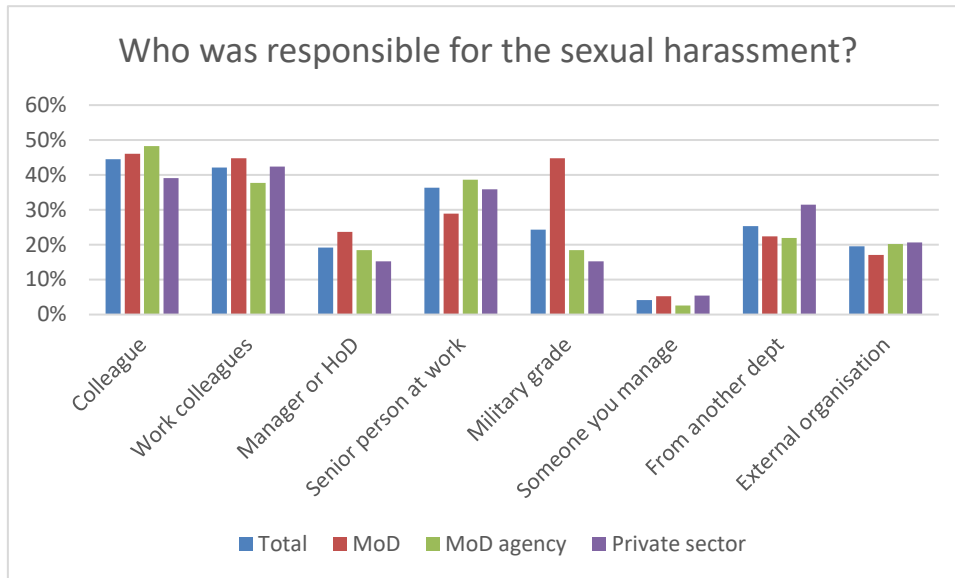
More than a third of respondents (36%) say they have been sexually harassed by a manager or someone else who is senior to them at work. Respondents working for a MoD agency (39%) or in the private sector (36%) are more likely than MoD respondents (29%) to have this type of perpetrator. One in five respondents have been harassed by their manager or head of department (19%), this is more likely in the MoD (24%) than the private sector (15%).

Respondents in the private sector are most likely to be harassed by someone who works for another part of the organisation (32%, compared to 22% of MoD respondents), and one in five respondents (20%) are harassed by someone outside of their organisation, with very little difference between types of organisation.

The workplace is the most likely place where respondents will be sexually harassed; a higher proportion of MoD respondents work in this type of toxic environment (79%), but it is little better in MoD agencies (76%) or the private sector (71%). Work related social events

¹ Servicewomen’s experiences of the Aftermath of Sexual Assault in the British Military, 2023, Gray, Lester and Norton, RUSI
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03071847.2023.2276305>

are the second most common places where sexual harassment takes place (29%). Respondents working for the MoD (31%) and in the private sector (34%) are the most likely to have this experience. Other work-related situations where respondents are vulnerable include work-related events such as conferences (15%), working in another location (15%) and working in another department (15%). Harassment while working in another part of the organisation appears to be worst in the private sector (23%).



In the previous section on types of sexual harassment, one in five respondents reported that they had received unwanted messages by text or email. This is reinforced by responses to this question with 15% receiving unwanted phone or text messages and 12% on the receiving end of communications by email or some other work communication channel.

Testimonies of respondents

Given the toxic nature of the workplace environment it is not surprising that just one in four respondents felt comfortable providing an anonymous comment about their experience of sexual harassment, and only 11% were willing to be directly quoted. To respect members wishes the responses have been aggregated so that individuals cannot be identified. Any direct quotes are from respondents that have consented to their comment being included in the report.

The comments reflect the findings elsewhere in the survey that sexist attitudes are widespread. Examples of unwanted touching, invasion of personal space, unwanted messaging, sexist comments and general misogyny are provided. Many respondents also highlight the everyday sexism of women's assumed role at work. Several women reported incidents of serious sexual assault and the trauma caused by both the initial incident and the failure of management in dealing with the issue. A failure to take action and a bullying culture create the environment for other more direct behaviours.

Behaviours experienced or witnessed at work

Unwanted touching	23
Staring/Leering/Invading personal space	16

Sexist comments directed at me	14
General misogyny	14
General sexist comments at work	12
Work not appropriate for role/Assumed gender role	11
Inappropriate messaging	10
No action taken when incident reported	9
Bullying/singled out in male dominated workplace	9
Serious sexual assault	6

General misogyny in the workplace

Sexist attitudes and remarks are common, making the workplace unwelcome. Remarks focus on a women’s appearance and undermine women by questioning their capabilities and professionalism. As well as work colleagues, senior staff join in with the comment. The general atmosphere created is of a workplace that reflects values which would not be acceptable in most walks of life.

“The toxic culture of sexism is materially harming the defence sector and the women who choose to work there. It cannot continue and I KNOW that my senior leadership do not recognise this issue and are doing nothing to stop or challenge it.” (Private sector employer)

“I have witnessed and confronted team members discussing sexual activity with a woman who they had just met in a work situation based purely on the clothes she was wearing. I have also confronted members of my peer group having inappropriate discussions of what they would like to do to a woman on a group WhatsApp.” (MoD employee)

“A senior person I work with (not in management chain) frequently makes sexist comments behind women’s backs about their capabilities, which has put me off applying for a job with him. I’ve heard from a couple of men about some people having made sexist jokes or comments behind women’s backs particularly about our appearances.” (MoD)

“I have had men talking about me saying what they would do to me in terms of a sexual nature.” (Private sector)

“I feel the attitude and culture isn’t modern, especially in relation to women in the workplace. It feels like stepping back in time. I wish I could say my experiences are from a long time ago but only a couple of weeks ago I was hugged and kissed in my chair unexpectedly by a colleague.” (Private sector)

Challenging sexual harassment can be difficult when there are no witnesses present. As well as being unable to deal with unwelcome remarks this can involve other invasions of personal space.

“Sexual harassment usually takes place in a 1-2-1 situation, when you are usually alone, talk and advances happen and there is no witnesses to this situation. Therefore it makes it very difficult to report these situations and usually it is not taken seriously. It is very uncomfortable when men stare at your chest when talking to you.”

Unwanted touching

Direct physical contact is common and can often be initiated by a male perpetrator following normal professional interactions or common work situations.

“I have had my leg touched in the office by someone who was meant to be a mentor, he also shared inappropriate images and had a nickname about being creepy across numerous departments.” (MoD)

“Personally on more than one occasion my professionalism and kindness was taken for flirting and that gave the impression it was acceptable to try and kiss me in a work place.” (MoD agency or other public sector organisation)

“I shared an office with my male line manager and this senior man kept coming into the office when my line manager was out and making suggestive remarks. One day he cornered me in the office and tried to touch me. I pushed him away and he left. I then told my line manager who spoke to this man. This man had done this to many other women and had been reported. But, today, this man/offender is head of the profession where I work.” (MoD agency or other public sector organisation)

Staring/leering

A hostile work environment is created by group behaviours such as cat-calling and leering.

“I do not feel comfortable walking across my work site by myself due to the catcalling and 'rubber necking' I have experienced in the past, and I will only walk across the site with a male colleague in my team. Many young women such as myself also feel the same.” (Private sector)

“I've both witnessed and been on the receiving end of leering, inappropriate touching and creepy behaviour from significantly senior ex-military colleagues - where in the moment I have perceived it as friendly, but on reflection it was clear there was a darker intent.” (Private sector)

“Throughout my years of working I have experienced inappropriate comments about my sex and the way I look from males within the same business and out and about. In work, when travelling around the site, I can feel like a piece of meat due to the stares I receive from males in vehicles or on foot.” (Private sector)

Inappropriate messaging

Modern forms of communications provide perpetrators with direct ways of pursuing women both inside work and outside.

“I've witnessed first-hand inappropriate messaging from male colleagues to female colleagues of a sexual nature, asking them to meet up, asking for pictures etc. This has happened on more than one occasion between different people.” (Private sector)

“I have had someone contact me out of hours to talk about their "fantasies".” (MoD agency or other public sector organisation)

“Have received an unwanted photo of a male colleague’s penis.” (MoD agency or other public sector organisation)

Being singled out

Bullying behaviours often accompany other forms of harassment with women blamed for the behaviours of their abusers.

“I have been personally belittled, had negative comments about my physical appearance and manner of dress, had “you must be gay then” comments when I have rejected sexual advances, and had negative comments and assumptions made about my professional capabilities and competence both to my face and to other colleagues behind my back.” (MoD agency or other public sector organisation)

“I was severely bullied by a Line Manager, when colleague reported it to my 2nd Line Manager - (without my knowledge) the next day the 2nd LM met me at my desk asking me “what had I done to cause the problem” despite various witness statements this complaint was never followed through - I left my job because of it.”

Serious sexual assault

There were 20 respondents who have been sexually assaulted at work. Several of these women shared their harrowing stories of being raped, confronting men sexually assaulting female colleagues or other serious sexual crimes. To protect the identities of these women their testimonies and other details are not included in this report.

What actions have employers taken to deter sexual harassment?

Respondents were asked to provide examples of actions taken by their employer, which in their view would deter unwanted behaviours. There were 163 comments, which are aggregated in the table below.

More than a third of those commenting say that their employer has not taken any noticeable action that deters these types of behaviours. Mandatory training and the publication of policies that make clear behaviours that are unacceptable are the most commonly cited comments. Communications, which include briefings and toolbox talks are used to reinforce messages about unacceptable behaviours. In MoD agencies and the private sector, respondents say that ‘call out’ areas have been created with clear reporting procedures, which may be particular initiatives taken by these employers to promote their policies. Respondents also report prompt responses to incidents when cases are reported.

Other measures taken to encourage a change in work culture include the introduction of inclusive policies to encourage a more diverse workforce and the creation of women’s networks to break isolation in male dominated workplaces.

What positive action has your employer taken to deter unwanted behaviours at work?

Comment	Total
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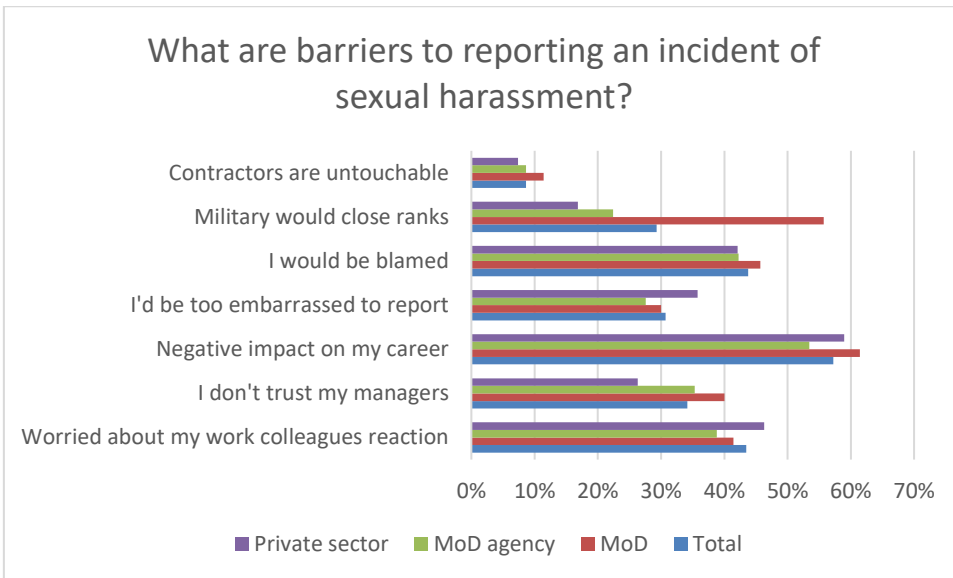
Nothing	66
Mandatory training	35
Employer publicises behaviours that are unacceptable	26
Communications/Briefings	21
Call out area/Clear reporting process	12
Prompt response to allegations	9
Inclusive office	8
Women's networks break isolation	6

Reporting incidents of sexual harassment at work

A majority of respondents know how to report an incident of sexual harassment (69%). Those working in the private sector are most likely to know the procedure (74%), a clear majority of MoD (62%) and MoD agencies (69%) respondents also know the process.

Respondents are evenly split between those that are confident of reporting an incident of sexual harassment (32%) and those that are not confident (35%), the remaining respondents are somewhat confident (33%). Confidence is greatest in the private sector (42%) and least in MoD agencies (26%), just under a third of MoD respondents are confident reporting incidents (30%).

Respondents are less confident that the complaint will be properly investigated or that there will be a satisfactory outcome. Only 22% of respondents are confident that a complaint of sexual harassment will be properly investigated, 47% are not confident, and 33% think that complaints will be dealt with satisfactorily, 50% think that they would not. Confidence in the investigative process is least in the MoD (16%) and highest in the private sector (27%). The proportion of respondents who think complaints would be dealt with satisfactorily is similar for each type of employer (33%), but a higher proportion of MoD respondents (57%) think that the outcome would be unsatisfactory, compared to MoD agencies (50%) and the private sector (44%). These results show that there are significant concerns about the reporting process.



The doubts that respondents feel about investigations are compounded by concerns about how they will be treated if they report an incident. More than half of respondents think that this will have a negative impact on their career (57%), that they would be blamed (44%) or that there will be a negative reaction by their work colleagues (43%).

The impact on a respondents' career is the main concern in all types of employer MoD (61%), followed by the private sector (59%) and MoD agencies (53%). In the private sector respondents are more worried about the reaction of work colleagues than in other sectors (46% compared to 41% in the MoD and 39% in MoD agencies), and concerns about being blamed are equally felt in all sectors (MoD 46%, MoD agencies 42%, private sector 42%).

In the MoD, 56% of respondents think that the military would close ranks if an incident is reported. A third of respondents do not trust their managers, this is highest in the MoD (40%, compared to 35% in MoD agencies and 26% in the private sector), and just under a third of respondents (30%) would be too embarrassed to report an incident.

Respondents were asked what would make them more confident to report incidents of sexual harassment at work. There were 162 comments, which are broadly similar for all types of employer. The table below aggregates these comments into broad categories.

Demonstrating that action would be taken is the most common comment, either that something would be done, that reported incidents would be taken seriously or that employers should publish testimonies of incidents that have been properly dealt with.

Providing a reporting tool that is independent of management is strongly recommended by respondents. Linked to this suggestion is clearer signposting of those responsible for dealing with complaints, a procedure that fairly protects both parties and a policy that clearly identifies behaviours that are unacceptable. Other measures to improve confidence include the recruitment of more female leaders, ensuring there is greater integrity and leadership from the top, encouraging open discussions that provide a supportive environment for women, and ensuring that there is no victim blaming.

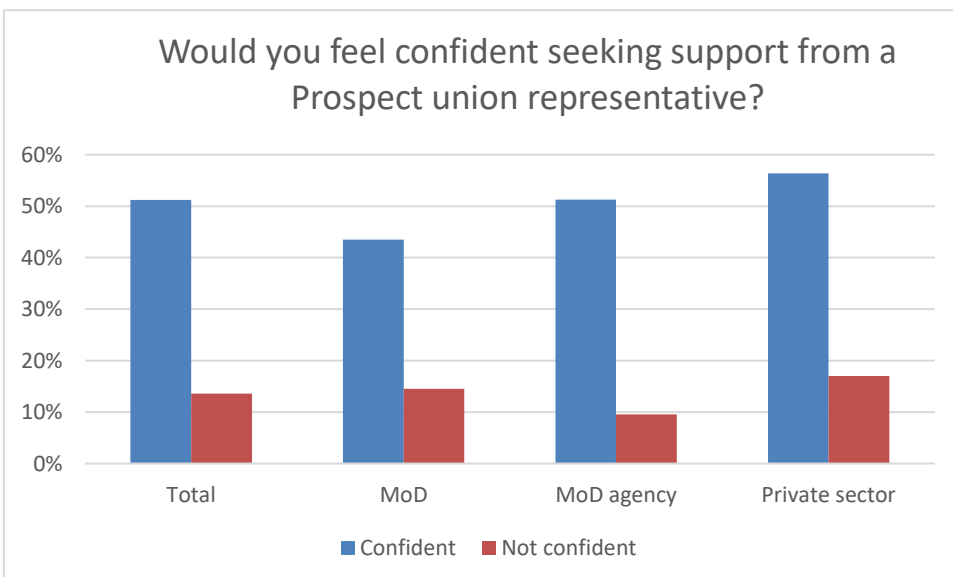
What would make you more confident reporting sexual harassment at work?

Comment	Total

Something would be done	25
External reporting tool independent of management	24
To be taken seriously/not ignored	22
Testimonies of sexual harassment incidents being properly dealt with	17
Clear signposting/Key staff identified who you can report to	9
Nothing - good process already in place	9
More female leaders	9
Procedure that protects both parties until case resolved	8
Leadership and integrity from the top	8
Cultural change	7
No victim blaming	7
Clearer example of behaviours that 'cross the line'/clear policy	6
More open discussions/women encouraged to speak up	6
Make training mandatory	6
Confidential reporting	5

Support provided by Prospect union reps

A majority of respondents (51%) have confidence in seeking support from a Prospect union representative, but there are differences by type of employer. Just 43% of MoD respondents have confidence in Prospect reps, compared to 51% in MoD agencies and 56% in the private sector. Respondents were asked for suggestions to improve confidence in the reporting of incidents to the union. There were 131 comments, which are summarised in the table below.



What would make you more confident reporting incidents of sexual harassment to Prospect?

Comment	Total
I wouldn't go to the union on this issue	20
Prospect reps are supportive	18
Take the issue seriously, take action, don't victimise	17
More female reps	12
How to report & how it would be investigated	10
Know who to contact/dedicated rep	10
Prospect should have more visibility	8
Knowing Prospect had the expertise to deal with incidents	7
Hearing about cases that the union has successfully dealt with	6
Prospect support but employer closes ranks	4
Be good at listening	4
Dedicated space for issues such as these	4
Training to respond appropriately (respect confidentiality)	4
Don't trust Prospect, reps would not respect confidentiality	3
Supportive network	2

A significant number of respondents did not think they would go to the union if there was an incident of sexual harassment. The reasons ranged from those that did not think the union provided support for these types of incidents or felt that they would be more likely to use the procedures that were in place. A similar number of respondents had a positive experience of support by their union rep.

Suggestions for improvement include making it clear that the union would take the issue seriously and would not victimise the complainant. The union is encouraged to make it clear how cases can be reported to the union and how it will deal with incidents. A small number of respondents reported a negative experience with a union rep, which meant that they no longer trusted the union with sexual harassment cases.

Respondents would also like to see more female reps. A number of respondents would like a dedicated rep they could go to if they had a concern at work.

Building confidence in Prospect's representation was another feature of the comments. Case studies of incidents successfully dealt with would help provide that confidence along with knowledge of the union's expertise at dealing with sexual harassment and what training is provided for reps.