

# Nothing changes if it isn't challenged

Front pages are covered in it, the news is bursting at the seams with it yet, Emma Shears believes, some organisations just don't want to deal with it.

It's a far reaching problem, it affects every industry and has done for decades. It's a difficult subject, it makes you wonder if you did something to provoke it, it needs to stop. And yet some organisations just don't want to deal with it.

We've been waking up to the stories day in, day out. #MeToo and #TimesUp are now part of everyday conversation. The seemingly smouldering volcano has erupted into a firestorm of allegations and controversy. No industry seems safe, but it became clear that some were trying to keep their heads down and avoid the issues staring them in the face.

2017 made one thing very clear, sexual harassment is everywhere!

## The problem

A BBC survey last year, found that two in five women and a fifth of men had been sexually harassed at work, but 63% of women and 79% of men didn't report this harassment to their employers.

I've worked in marketing and business development for almost 20 years and have on a number of occasions been on the receiving end of crude jokes, lewd remarks and often a gaze or stray hand that lingered for a bit too long. When I didn't agree with a male colleague I was told "not to let my hormones get in the way of an important result". We run events, attend networking dos, we mix with lots of different people that it isn't surprising that we face these issues.

I was chatting to an ex-colleague the other day who thinks that 'the world has gone sexual harassment crazy. People need to get on with their lives and stop making a fuss'. My colleague is female and has been harassed herself, but in her words 'it's part of the job'. I was amazed – sexual harassment doesn't appear anywhere in my job description! It's attitudes like this which make it difficult for people to feel able to speak up when something isn't right.



**Speaking up is the most important aspect.**

## My story

In a previous job, I was attending a networking event and was chatting to a group of people. One of the men in the group said to me "what services do you sell?" I explained I worked in marketing and business development for a law firm. "Do I have any business that you'd like to develop?" he replied with a grin and wink. The other women in the group looked stunned, the other man just laughed.

The thing is this wasn't the first time someone had made a lewd remark to me, and it hasn't been the last. So why did this comment have such an impact on me on this occasion?

I excused myself from the group and went into the toilets to calm down, angry at myself for feeling scared to say something.

At lunch we happened to be sitting at the same table. He was staring at the chest of a young woman sitting next to him explaining that he was trying to read her name badge. She was clearly feeling uncomfortable and embarrassed as his gaze lingered far too long.

Before I knew what I was doing I was standing next to him calmly and quietly expressing my disgust at his continued inappropriate and disrespectful behaviour. I was surprised at my own confidence but knew that his behaviour had to be stopped. It was a measured response, I said what I needed to say and went back to my seat. This time the smiles were on the faces of the women at the table and it was the men who looked shocked. He tried to counter it, saying it was "just a joke". Obviously embarrassed, he left.

That evening at home I replayed the

events of the day in my head. As I sat on my sofa and reflected I cried – perhaps it was the adrenaline. The next day I told my boss what had happened. He sat quietly and listened, then said "are you ok? What can I do to help?".

Speaking up can be scary. You don't know what kind of response you'll get and even when I was speaking to my boss I didn't know how he was going to react. Would he sweep it under the carpet and pretend it didn't happen? No, he contacted the company this person worked for and made a complaint.

I was fortunate my boss was willing to listen. Some of my friends who work in the same industry have been harassed over the years but found it difficult to say anything or found their organisation slow or unwilling to act.

## Today

Since the out pouring of allegations in the press, many organisations have moved forward in their thinking and how they react to such allegations. At Lewis Silkin we are committed to spending 2018 helping organisations to make a *Lasting Change*. We have hosted a series of round tables, designed workshops and seminars all to encourage organisations to look at their workplace cultures and behaviours. We've designed 'Speak Up' seminars, which have proved very popular, to encourage employees to speak up when they witness or are on the receiving end of unacceptable behaviour.

Speaking up is the most important aspect of this. We need to encourage a working environment where men and women feel safe to speak up and organisations listen and act accordingly, because if not now, when?



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