About Victim Support

1. Victim Support (VS) is the independent charity for people affected by crime and traumatic events in England and Wales. Our specialist teams provide individual, independent, emotional and practical help to enable people to cope and recover from the effects of crime, including sexual harassment. Our services are free and available to everyone, whether or not the crime has been reported and regardless of when it happened.

2. VS welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Women and Equalities Committee’s inquiry into sexual harassment of women and girls. Last year we offered help to over 800,000 victims. Each year we support a number of women and girls who have been affected by sexual harassment and in 2017 we supported 6,439 female victims of sexual offences.

3. Victim Support’s free Supportline runs 24 hours a day, seven days a week and can be reached on 08 08 16 89 111 or online at https://www.victimsupport.org.uk/get-help.

Impact of sexual harassment

4. The effects of sexual harassment can be serious and long lasting for those who experience it. It can undermine victims’ confidence and lead to them feeling less safe and secure in their own workplace or neighbourhoods. Sexual harassment can have lead to physical and emotional impacts, such as anxiety, difficulty sleeping, anger, depression, loss of appetite, headaches and nausea. It some cases it can also have devastating practical consequences; it may result in women having to leave their job, change the way they dress or change their routines, such as their walk home, the shops they visit or the facilities they use.

Actions that the government can take

5. The Government should look at creating a single specific cross-government definition of sexual harassment. This would help to ensure that it is properly understood by statutory agencies and the public, that it is actively challenged and enable a more co-ordinated response. An example of this is the cross-government definition of domestic violence and abuse.¹

6. The Government should also examine the feasibility and desirability of creating a single specific offence of sexual harassment, for cases where the harassment would constitute a crime. Currently a number of different offences can cover sexual

harassment, depending on the offence experienced, but no specific offence exists. Legislation should be reviewed to identify any gaps and to ensure that allegations are dealt with robustly and effectively.

7. Again the legislative response to domestic abuse is an example of this, specifically the creation of the offence of coercive and controlling behaviour under the Serious Crime Act 2015. Some offences existed prior to the introduction of this legislation that, to a lesser degree, covered some similar areas around this behaviour. However, the introduction of the specific offence of coercive and controlling behaviour not only closed a gap in the law, but through a single offence sent a message to victims and the public that this type of behaviour is a crime and will be taken seriously. The same message must be sent for sexual harassment.

8. There is also a need for statutory agencies to build a stronger picture of the scale of sexual harassment and to better capture statistics and information. Some police forces, including Nottinghamshire Police, record misogyny as a hate crime. This has a number of benefits, including allowing women and girls to report incidents that might not be considered a crime, and have them investigated by the police. It also allows sexual harassment incidents to be recorded, thus building up intelligence on the scale, scope and type of sexual harassment in an area. Recording incidents of sexual harassment allows agencies, the government and workplaces to better understand and tackle the sexual harassment of women and girls.

Supporting victims

9. It is vital that anyone experiencing sexual harassment has access to independent advice and support. Charities and support services, such as Victim Support, can provide help and support to victims as well as advice on the range of options available to them. Awareness needs to be raised of the support options available to victims as well as of what constitutes sexual harassment to ensure that victims are able to access relevant support.

Changing negative attitudes and behaviours

10. High quality, age appropriate relationships and sex education is key to changing societal attitudes towards sexual harassment. Tackling sexual harassment of women and girls must focus on prevention; and teaching young people about sexual harassment and what does and does not constitute acceptable behaviour can shift views and attitudes on this issue. VS welcomes the introduction of compulsory relationships education in primary schools and relationships and sex education in secondary schools, and the Government’s decision to update the statutory guidance for these subjects. Educating young people about sexual harassment is vital to altering individual’s and society’s attitudes and approaches to the problem.

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2 https://www.nottinghamshire.police.uk/hatecrime