

Submission 59

My submission is about my most recent experience of workplace sexual harassment, how it impacted me both personally and professionally and how it ultimately led to me quitting my job.

I worked for a disability service provider, assisting young adults with a disability to gain the skills they would need to obtain employment.

One young man I worked with would routinely make inappropriate comments about my body and would talk about me in a sexual context to the other people I worked with. On a number of occasions he excused himself from my classes because he had an erection. All of this made me feel very uncomfortable, I was constantly trying to modify my behaviour in the hopes that it would prevent his inappropriate behaviours. I would try to distance myself from him. At this point I had not mentioned anything to my manager because I was worried about how it would make me look. I had however spoken to him about appropriate behaviour versus inappropriate behaviour.

His behaviour became increasingly inappropriate and threatening towards me. He would walk past me and make comments to me such as 'I know you want to kiss me' etc. One day, after my class had finished and most of the other staff had left. I was preparing the room for the following day, when he entered the room. He locked the door behind him and began to approach me, making sexual comments and asking me to touch him. I told him that what he was doing was completely inappropriate. I was afraid because he had locked me in the room with him, I did not know at the time that any other staff were around and he was threatening me. As he approached me, I tried to walk away but I was trapped in the room. He began to chase me and I had to run around the class room tables to dodge him, until I was able to unlock the door and run out. I ran directly to the staff room and locked myself inside.

There I saw my manager and I immediately told her everything that had been happening and how stressed I was becoming at work. The first thing my manager suggested was that I should wear different clothes, insinuating that my clothing was somehow the cause of my harassment. Despite the fact that the clothes I wore to work were within policy. I said that I would like the matter dealt with, as I wanted to again feel safe and less stressed at work. I asked to not have to work with the person who was harassing me. My manager said that she would see what she could do.

I followed protocol in talking with appropriate managers and filing reports, however the company I worked for seemed so hesitant to do anything about it. I was still expected to work with the person and he continued to harass me. I pushed for change with my manager and even made a complaint with my senior manager. I was told that I was out of line for making the complaint and that I was expected to continue to work with the person who was still harassing me.

Eventually my manager did briefly speak with everyone including the person who was

sexually harassing me about appropriate behaviours and what sexual harassment was but this was all. I was told that I was making a big deal out of nothing and that the company had followed protocol. The person who was harassing me did not face any consequences in any way and I was expected to continue to work with him despite the daily harassment.

I became so stressed, it affected my sleep, I became emotional and frustrated. It got to the point where I dreaded and feared going to work because of the constant harassment and complete lack of support from management. I felt as though my workplace was dangerous and unsafe. I feared being left alone with the person who was harassing me because I knew he could physically assault me and nothing would happen – I would not be protected.

Months had past and I continued to complain to management about what was happening. I said how stressed I felt and how I felt it was unsafe for not only myself but other staff and the other people with disabilities that we work with. I even began to speak with a counselling service and with the ombudsman over the conditions. My company told me that I was making a big deal out of nothing, they ended up transferring me without consulting me to another department, where my hours and pay were cut. They told me they did this because it was for my own safety but considering I lost hours and received a pay cut, I felt as though it was a punishment for speaking out. Not long after they transferred me. I quit my job and stopped speaking with the ombudsman. I felt so exhausted and so stressed, I just did not want to deal with it anymore. I just wanted to forget it all.

I feel as though my outcome here, could have been completely different if my workplace supported me in anyway. Instead of blaming me, telling me I was making a big deal out of nothing and providing no support and failing to make any change. My company did not care about workplace safety and it prioritised the client over the worker to the point where it happily put the worker in danger. My complaint was never taken seriously and I was just expected to put up with sexual harassment, as though it was just another part of my job.

Failure to adequately address the sexual harassment I was facing in my work, ended up costing me my job. It impacted my mental health for months, causing stress and fear.