

Preventing online Sexism

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Online sexism: what are we talking about?

Sexism is an attitude or action that humiliates, excludes or stigmatises individuals based on their gender. It can take many forms. Sometimes disguised as humour, expressed in a seemingly well-meaning way, or used to justify violent acts.

We refer to sexist cyberviolence when such behaviour occurs in digital spaces: online harassment (repeated text messages, calls, etc.), spreading rumours, and much more. The risks are not excluded in contexts of remote and hybrid work (HRW)

Understanding the issue



What are the risks of sexism linked to HRW?

The persistent impact of sexism in hybrid and remote work

The shift to new ways of organising and communicating through remote work has seen an increase in sexist behaviour (e.g., comments about appearance on Zoom, deliberate exclusion from email threads or meeting invites). Such behaviours heighten psychosocial risks for women. Women are disproportionately affected by “Zoom fatigue” due to the pressures felt around physical appearance. One in seven women report feeling “very” or even “extremely” fatigued after a video call, compared to one in twenty men¹. A DARES study² revealed that women are more likely to be criticised by those around them for perceived unavailability (27% of women working remotely versus 20% of men).

More violent abuse online

The “cockpit effect” refers to the loss of empathy in online interactions, where individuals feel dehumanised when communicating via electronic channels (intranet, emails, etc.). This often leads to aggressive behaviour, with the lack of face-to-face interaction normalising or even encouraging the violence of such attacks. The cockpit effect illustrates the emotional detachment of the perpetrator, who is no longer aware of the victim’s emotional response.

Preventing and mitigating sexism in HRW

How can we reduce the risks of discrimination and sexist behaviour in hybrid and remote work?

- **Raising awareness**

Risk assessment is the first step in addressing the factors behind sexist cyberviolence. Organisations can appoint an independent body to evaluate risks and conduct internal investigations. Mandatory training for all those in positions of authority and responsibility is also a crucial tool in raising awareness and proactively tackling these harmful, often hard-to-detect behaviours.

- **Reporting**

Online sexism often takes place out of sight, which is part of what makes it so insidious. That's why, wherever possible, it is vital to implement listening and reporting mechanisms, enabling potential victims to come forward while reducing the isolation that this experience can bring. Employers must ensure that these systems are both independent and competent and clearly outline the internal procedures to be followed once an alert has been raised.

- **Sanctioning**

When cases of online sexism are reported within an organisation, it is essential to carry out thorough internal investigations to determine appropriate sanctions. These may range from a formal warning to a reprimand or even dismissal and must be applied swiftly and fairly.

- **Providing support**

Once an appropriate sanction has been issued, there may be cases where both the victim and the perpetrator remain colleagues. In such situations, both parties require support: the victim, to avoid feeling stigmatised; and the perpetrator, not to be excluded from the workplace community but to be realigned with the organisation's values of equality.

What are the roles of Managers and Human Resources?

Managers



- Identify signs of sexist cyberviolence and raise team awareness about gender stereotypes in the context of HRW
- Support victims and perpetrators in the process of repair and reconciliation

Human resources



- Offer support and training to managers to help them recognise and manage the risks and signs of sexist cyberviolence
- Incorporate hybrid and remote working conditions into company policies for addressing and preventing sexism

Conclusion

Many gender biases and stereotypes continue to be perpetuated in hybrid and remote work environments. Because these incidents happen online, they are particularly difficult to detect, report, and address. However, there are numerous actions that organisations can take in terms of assessing, reporting, sanctioning, and supporting victims to help reduce and actively combat online sexism.



Further Reading

- AFMD, 2023 #StOpE Barometer: Everyday Sexism in the Workplace Remains a Reality for 8 out of 10 Women, <https://www.afmd.fr/en/stope-barometer-2023>