

Eradicating sexual harassment at work

20 January 2025

In 2023 McDonalds signed a legally binding agreement with the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) under section 23 of the Equality Act in response to concerns over its handling of sexual harassment complaints made by staff at its UK restaurants.

According to the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union, in 2019 more than 1,000 UK cases had been reported.

As part of its agreement with the EHRC, McDonalds would have committed to:

- Communicating a zero-tolerance approach to sexual harassment.
- Conducting an anonymous survey of workers about workplace safety.
- Enhancing its policies and procedures to prevent sexual harassment.
- Improve its responses to any complaints.
- Deliver anti-harassment training to all staff, with specific training for managers to help them identify risk areas in their own restaurants.
- Support its franchisees to implement the policy and provide training materials and monitor progress towards a safe and inclusive working environment.

Fast forward to January 2025 and over 700 junior UK McDonalds workers have joined a legal action against their employer alleging discrimination, homophobia and sexual harassment which claim has implicated over 450 of McDonald's UK restaurants.

McDonalds has stated that ensuring the safety of its 168,000 workers is its top priority and that it has taken action to address these issues which include the dismissal of 29 members of staff in the past year.

The situation at McDonalds should remind employers of every size and sector of the importance of taking the bullet-pointed steps, and possibly others, to protect its staff from such abhorrent behaviour and itself from the many consequences of such conduct.

The new legal requirement on all employers to take reasonable proactive steps to prevent the sexual harassment of its staff should further encourage employers to prioritise its approach to combatting sexual harassment at work.

Changing the culture of a workplace can take significant time and resources, require determination and courage. An employer can sometimes feel understandably frustrated at having to deal with behaviours which are sadly rooted in society. However, eradicating sexual harassment at work (and all other forms of unlawful workplace harassment), should be a primary objective.

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