

# BYSTANDER ACTION

*What to say and do*

A key feature in establishing a fair and equitable workplace is ensuring both men and women are treated with equal respect and consideration. In keeping with this, sexist language and jokes, discrimination based on gender, or any sexual harassment should be managed decisively. No workplace can achieve gender equality if employees (of either sex) are being targeted in this way, and not acting upon sexist behavior often has a negative effect on workplace culture.

'Bystander action' is encouraging and equipping all staff to speak up and step in when they observe or hear assumptions based on gender, sexist comments or disrespectful behaviour. This does not include intervening in unsafe or violent situations.

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## Five questions to consider before taking action:

1. Is the behaviour I'm seeing or hearing sexist, discriminatory and/or sexual harassment?
2. What do my workplace's policies and procedures say about behaviour like this?
3. Do I feel safe to step in? Will I be supported by management if I do? Is this something I'm expected to challenge myself – or am I better off seeking assistance? Is there any risk of escalation of violence here?
4. Is taking action going to prove helpful? If I were on the receiving end, would I want somebody to step in for me? Will it make a positive difference to a person's behavior or to the workplace culture?
5. How serious is it? How should I respond? What should I say?

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There is a bigger picture here. Research has shown that constructive bystander action sets a compelling example to others. The creation of more respectful relationships between men and women can help to change the very attitudes that have created gender inequality in the first place.

Bystander action also draws an important line in the sand about what is unacceptable and what is appropriate behaviour in the workplace and in society. It has been cited as an important preventative technique to eliminate the culture of violence against women, for example.

## What Do I Say?

The first thing to remember is that tone is everything. You don't have to be confrontational when guiding someone back onto the right track. However, if you're witnessing repeated behaviour, a firmer approach is required, and management should become involved.

\*If you are a bystander to a violent or unsafe situation, police should be called.

### SOME RESPONSES TO SEXIST COMMENTS (OR ASSUMPTIONS BASED ON GENDER)

- "Hold on, let's go back a few steps. What are we assuming here?"
- "Is anyone else uncomfortable with that comment?"
- "Pardon? What did you just say?"
- "What exactly do you mean by that comment?"
- "That sounds like an assumption. Are you basing it on anything other than gender?"
- "Is anyone else concerned that what we are doing could be discriminatory?"
- "Is that really what you think about men and women?"
- "Maybe we need to rethink that, so we aren't basing it on gender"
- "I don't think that fits in with the way we've all agreed to talk to each other in this team/organisation"
- "I don't like those comments. Surely we've moved beyond that stuff now?"
- "That's a bit harsh. Let's be fair"
- "No, I really don't agree with that"
- "I think what you're saying may be discriminatory/sexist."

### SOME RESPONSES TO SEXIST JOKES

- "Really? Are we still saying that kind of thing?"
- "Is that respectful?"
- "Thanks for that. What was it? A joke from the 60's?"
- "If you have to say 'I'm only joking', then perhaps it wasn't funny"
- "Please stop telling those jokes. They are sexist and I find them offensive."

### SOME RESPONSES TO CONTROLLING BEHAVIOURS/ INTIMIDATION OR VIOLENCE

- "I've noticed what's happening here"
- "You should never treat anyone like that - male or female"
- "I will be letting people know what I have seen and heard"
- "That's not right. It's also illegal."