

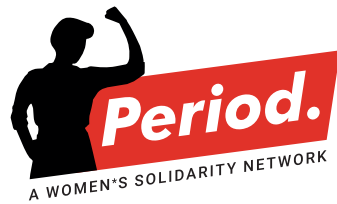
IT'S NOT THAT GREY

**How to identify
the grey area —**
a practical guide for
the twilight zone of
sexual harassment



About Period.

Period. is an intersectional feminist network based in Brussels. We practice intersectional feminism and solidarity by offering and gathering tools for and by women* to directly contribute to change in society.



 @periodbrussels  @period_brussels www.periodbrussels.eu

About the authors

Sara Hassan is a communication expert who worked for the European Parliament until recently. Starting her career as a journalist and activist in several human rights NGOs, she is now producer and co-host of the feminist women* of colour podcast “Vocal about it” and is active on a range of subjects on Twitter @sarahas_san.

Juliette Sanchez-Lambert is a feminist unicorn who cares about human rights for all. She deals with her anger at this patriarchal world by building empowering workshops and trainings — and also by writing this guide. She tweets too @JSanchezLambert.

TRIGGER WARNING: This guide contains graphic stories of sexual harassment, especially from page 20 to 35.

Thanks

We want to thank the following incredible people for dedicating time and energy to making this guide possible.

Our wonderful Period orga crew: Inge Chen, Anna Gröschl, Milena Horn, Katharina Steinwendtner, Laura Krenzke-Wohlfart.

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IT'S NOT THAT GREY

**How to identify
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sexual harassment

Foreword by Terry Reintke

There is one thing that cannot be stressed enough: **#metoo** is not about sex. It is about power. It is about the power relations in our societies. Silence breakers disclosed the habitual conduct of people in power. They are evidence for the fact that we have yet failed to make the necessary power shifts for a more equal society.

For me one thing is central in the so-called aftermath of the #metoo debates: we will not give in and be silenced again. Typical strategies of sitting it out waiting for it to blow over, which we have seen so often in the past years in relation to feminist struggles, will not succeed this time. This publication is a bright example of exactly that: we will not stop. We will stand up for each other; empower each other in the fight for fundamental rights for all.

I have seen change happening. I met women* who have set up their red flag system, who clearly uphold their personal boundaries. People that came up to me after events and told me: "Growing up I just thought this was normal. The #metoo debate has changed that. It is not normal and I am standing up for this."

This is not to say we are there yet.

It has only been a crack in the basement of our patriarchal societies. But I feel that this basement keeps on trembling. This is not over yet. And women* networks like Period., activists like Sara Hassan and Juliette Sanchez-Lambert — they make sure that the quake will not die away without having achieved real change. I am tremendously thankful for the work that has been done with this publication. As the authors say: "it is not our responsibility to end harassment. What we can do is empower ourselves to trust our instincts."

I hope it reaches, touches and empowers many of you out there, as it did me.

For us, this debate is a work-in-progress. We want to start it to become more aware, to discuss something which has been in the dark for too long. There are no definite answers, but first ideas and recommendations. They are meant to empower all of us to learn. If you want to be part of this discussion, send us your feedback: terry.reintke@ep.europa.eu.

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Why this guide?

We live in a world where the vast majority of women* will be the target of harassment, sexual assault or rape at some point in their lives. However, women* are not given the right tools and education to protect themselves and navigate this world, where patriarchy and sexism rule.

Women* are taught from a young age that they must assimilate. They are taught to be nice and to smile, to endure things that should never be endured, to shut up, to always assume good intentions, to always say yes. Whenever we do dare to speak up, we are told that we're exaggerating and that it isn't that bad; that we are making stuff up.

Our stories are not believed and our experiences are not considered valid. The culture of silence prevents us from seeing real risks; normalises or dismisses behaviour that violates our boundaries, gaslights† our own discomfort in this and prevents us from saying "no" or being heard when we do so.

We, the women* of Period., have not met any woman* who did not have a story of sexual harassment. If it was not their own story, it was the story of a friend, colleague, or relative who was harassed by a friend, partner, colleague or acquaintance.

When we realised that we were not the only ones who have gone through these situations, we knew that something had to be done. We decided to educate ourselves on the topic. In the three years since our network was created, we have trained several hundreds of women*. We have provided safe spaces to share our stories and created workshops where we developed strategies against sexual harassment. But we did not only compile these stories; they are also our very own. We have experienced a lot of them ourselves and wanted to help others by sharing what we've been through.

In the wake of **#metoo**, the stories we heard in the media came to echo our own. We have mainly heard stories about white middle-class women*, while the voices of trans, queer, disabled and women* of colour have often gone unheard — even though these intersections can make people particularly vulnerable and exposed. In understanding how harassers find their targets, it is crucial to talk about vulnerabilities. The women* living in the margins of our societies are often unheard because they may not be able to afford coming

† Gaslighting is a form of psychological abuse, where someone withholds information or gives false information to someone, in order to make them confused and doubt their own sense of reality.

forward with their stories. They may be afraid of retaliation in the form of economic restrictions like losing their jobs, or physical sanctions such as the fear of even more abuse. We must talk about the unheard.

“SEXUAL ASSAULT IS ABOUT THE ABUSE OF POWER. IT IS ALWAYS WOMEN* WHO ARE MARGINALISED, IT IS THE YOUNG, IT IS THE INTERN, IT IS THE IMMIGRANT, IT IS THE TRANS. THEY ARE ALWAYS MOST AT RISK, BECAUSE SOCIETY LISTENS TO THEM THE LEAST.”

ALEXANDRIA OCASIO-CORTEZ

We could see that our stories were not isolated but in fact part of a much bigger, systematic and structural problem, so we started to look into these stories more closely. We wrote them down and found that these stories are not so unique. They follow patterns. But often, the public only recognises very blatant and explicit instances of harassment, such as the “hand on the arse” with which articles about sexual harassment are usually illustrated. We’re taught: this is what harassment looks like. The problem is that if we only keep our eyes open for this blatant “hand on the arse” we don’t see all the other moments.

Sexual harassment doesn’t only start when it is publicly visible.

It can begin seemingly harmlessly — if you look at the steps in isolation — and then escalates further. It is important not to look at the behaviour in a vacuum, but to take various factors into account.

Harassment is always on a spectrum and builds up over time. Within this, there are escalation levels that can begin inconspicuously, but create a dynamic in which more and more violations are possible. For example, if a harasser is not reprimanded for a suggestive remark, they will feel secure and entitled enough to venture to the next advance. The logic is that if the harasser succeeds at level one, they will advance further, break more and more space and further intrude into the target’s personal space. The higher these escalation levels are, the more difficult it is to break out of this system. This is so insidious that affected people are led to believe they entered this voluntarily, while in reality, they did not consent to what often only turns out much later as the real intention of the perpetrator. It is part of the perpetrators’ strategy to pretend that their target played along.

* anyone who identifies as a woman

However this is not the case as pressure and/or conditions of dependency are at play which are made invisible by the perpetrators' continual violation of boundaries disguised as a "game". The affected ones do not have the choice to exit this system and say no without fearing severe repercussions. By pretending and making the affected person believe that they willingly taken part in the first stage, the perpetrators make it extremely difficult for the target to step out of this system. We need to understand that these steps are connected to detect harassment as it unfolds.

We developed the Red Flag System to help you identify early instances of sexual harassment and regain trust in your own judgement.

The Red Flag System helps you pay close attention to your personal boundaries and your right to hold them, and to identify when they are being crossed. This system is here to provide you with tools that enable you to recognise behaviours and environments that lead to abuse of power early on and to acknowledge the feelings you have about them.

There is a common feeling and knowledge about what harassment looks like that remains unspoken. We know the gut tension we have when someone is too close to us, freezing up when someone who should not touch us does, the feeling of being pushed into a corner, the feeling of helplessness when someone we trust suddenly wants something completely different from us. When we have information about harassment and know about the logic and effects that many others experience, we can recognise those situations and distance ourselves earlier. We want to share and spread this knowledge, to make up a sort of common culture — one that is usually not represented in mainstream discourse.

The result of our research is what you are holding in your hands now: a guide filled with our collection of knowledge from people affected by harassment, which is so often made invisible. This is the kind of knowledge that will serve you and your sisters; the kind of knowledge that can help us to create change. Let's be clear: the responsibility to end harassment does not lie in our hands. Perpetrators and a society that allows this to happen are responsible when it comes to ending harassment. It is completely unfair that we as potential targets are supposed to undertake additional educational and emotional labor so that we can protect ourselves better. However, we also cannot wait idly until those who benefit from a sexist system finally decide to stand up for

those who are oppressed by it. We will not overcome the patriarchy with a single blow, we must attack it from many different directions and develop many strategies. What we can do is to empower ourselves to trust our instincts and step up for ourselves and others.

This guide is written from a non-male perspective, because Period. is a network for everybody who identifies as woman*. The stories we heard, which have widely informed this guide, were stories of women* harassed by men. However, we want to stress that everyone can be a perpetrator, regardless of their gender or identity. Anyone can be a target. And while empowering those who experience harassment is one key to stopping it, change will not happen without holding perpetrators accountable for their actions, and with the involvement of bystanders†.

Finally, **this guide is for everyone.** It is for those of us who have experienced harassment and for those who have not. It is for those who have witnessed harassment, and those who do not really know what harassment looks like. It is for those who want to know about the mechanisms of harassment, and those who want tools for a specific action plan. We believe this guide contains public interest knowledge and should be put in everyone's hands.

Now go ahead and dive into the guide! Go through the exercises, practice using the tools and adapt them to your situation. And most importantly: talk about it. Share it with your friend, your colleague, your sister, your mom, or anyone you feel can benefit from this information. Every person who starts trusting themselves and their judgement, and stands up for themselves and others, is one more blow to the patriarchy.

REMEMBER — WE ARE IN THIS TOGETHER.

This is just the beginning. All the stories you read here were deliberately and proactively brought to us by friends or through workshops at our women*'s network. We refrained from approaching people and asking them about their stories, as these are highly sensitive issues and can cause retraumatisation. We want to foster a community-based online project in which we accumulate more and more common knowledge and incorporate new case studies that go beyond our previous experience and analysis. **Join us on periodbrussels.eu!**

† people who are witnessing harassment

How to use this guide

Each part of this guide makes sense on its own. That is, you can read each part as you wish, in any direction you like. Whether you have a lot of knowledge about the issue or whether you are new to this, this guide is for you. You can read it from cover to cover, you can quickly flip through it, look up some deeper knowledge, then come back to where you were... whatever works for you!

Do you want to...

- Learn how to build your Red Flag System, a reliable alert system to detect harassment?
GO TO PAGE 15
- Practice your alert system with four real-life stories and apply your own red flags to them?
GO TO PAGE 18
- Compare your red flags with an already established list to get an idea of what is not acceptable?
GO TO PAGE 36
- Have a list of all the red flags you should look out for?
GO TO PAGE 36
- Find specific ways to speak up against harassment?
GO TO PAGE 43
- Know how to be an active bystander and support people around you?
GO TO PAGE 52
- Learn more about the ingrained images and narratives about sexual harassment that are prevalent in our society, or how people can make you vulnerable and exploit your vulnerabilities?
LOOK IT UP ON PAGE 59



The Red Flag System:

**Build your personal
alert system**

"THE GREY ZONE"

YOU HAVE
NO SENSE
OF HUMOUR

I WAS JUST
MAKING A JOKE

IT WAS A
MISUNDER-
STANDING

EVERYONE ELSE
HERE THINKS
IT'S FUNNY

WE CAN'T FLIRT
ANYMORE WITHOUT
BEING ACCUSED
OF SEXUAL
HARASSMENT

Sound familiar? Allegedly, it is not possible to draw the lines between flirting and harassment, between love and abuse. People affected by harassment are told to remain silent, to brush it off, to play along, to deny their feelings when they feel uncomfortable, humiliated or afraid. If we are told to do so and we don't, we face intense criticism for "making a scene" or we are labelled as frigid killjoys who can't take a compliment. Part of the perfidious logic is this: if we feel uncomfortable with it, it is our fault. Because we must have done something wrong, interpreted something wrong or somehow even invited the overstepping of our personal boundaries. This logic is so prevalent that when society does not remind us, we do it ourselves since we have internalised it.

The grey zone is only grey because harassers push boundaries without being concerned about or asking if the other person is fine with it. As we are socialised to relativise our experiences, to silence ourselves, to find excuses for the perpetrator and to treat our own feelings with suspicion, it can take a lot of time to recognise when someone has gone too far. It is even harder to say something when we are told that things are "supposed" to be unclear and blurry or blame us for these transgressions instead of the perpetrators. In this context, it can take a very long time until we can finally say without doubt: this is too much, this is harassment. Many of us don't even get to this point because we have normalised constant aggressions, because we feel there is too much at stake, or because we are blurred for past transgressions have reduced our ability to identify them now.

The concept of the grey zone is used to cover up harassment. Everything that happens in the grey zone can be a matter of misunderstanding, a joke, a game, an allegedly incidental touch. Harassers get away with their abuse of power because they know their behaviours will not be questioned, whether by us or by the patriarchal society we live in. Things can only be called blurry when our feelings about the actions are completely disregarded.

“FLIRTING FEELS GOOD. SEXUAL HARASSMENT DOES NOT.”¹

By writing this guide, we want our sisters to claim the right to feel good in their lives. To start valuing and respecting our boundaries. To relearn to connect with our inner sense of when somebody crosses a line, and to learn to identify harassment.

We do not think it is our responsibility to end harassment. But we believe that with the right knowledge, the grey zone is not that grey after all. Change starts with our knowledge and empowerment.

It's about time we deconstruct the grey zone.

Can't we do something early on?

Sexual harassment often builds up over a long time before it manifests and becomes visible. Most legal systems do not (yet) acknowledge the many shapes and nuances of harassment, ignoring a multilayered reality in which it can be difficult to understand when harassment started to occur and what can be considered harassment. They are based on the binary definitions of right and wrong — and a culture of disbelieving and blaming those who are affected. Victims are blamed for harassment because of their behaviour or the clothes they wear, while perpetrators are forgiven because they “did not know they were doing harm”. Today's concepts and judgments used to consider harassment are not accurate. They leave survivors thinking that they were hallucinating or exaggerating, and diminish the importance of what they were experiencing, while our judgment is exactly what we have to pay attention to.

Sexual harassment does not exist from the moment it is “officially” recognised by an employer, a court or the media. It doesn't need to be perceived and confirmed by the outside world to be real. It starts to exist from the moment the harasser is violating the boundaries of the one they decide to harass. All these patriarchal mechanisms perturb our internal barometer and interfere with the sense of what we are ok with. The harassing behaviour as much as the discourse around it forces us to develop a higher tolerance towards things we shouldn't tolerate in the first place.

DISCLAIMER: The term “survivor” comes from the discourse on sexual violence, in contrast to the term “victim”. But we respect everyone's choice to self-identify as either, both or something else.

Harassment doesn't come out of the blue, it gradually develops and is made of a constellation of factors. The boundary crossings build on each other and create a system of their own between target and perpetrator. The ones affected by harassment are often unable to claim back their boundaries without having to fear much and transgress many conventions. When we say that harassment works along a continuum, this means that harassment begins seemingly harmlessly. It develops along escalation stages.

- Those escalation levels can be very close to each other, with each step enabling the subsequent one. If the harasser can get away with the first step, they will move on to the next, and the next after that, and so on. For example, if a harasser realises that they can get away with a very sexual comment, they might feel entitled and safe enough to send explicit pictures as the following step.
- The further the escalation has gone, the harder it is to step out of this system.
- If you look at the steps separately you might see “just” a joke, a compliment, an allegedly casual touch, an “unconventional” text, a boss going out alone with their intern. But when grouped together, you can clearly see harassment.

Often we do not notice until much later when a boundary is crossed. When we take a step back, we see that it has been building up for a long time.

So isn't there anything we can do before the damage has been done, before we feel cornered, isolated and unable to reach out to anyone? Do we really have to wait until it feels unbearable to speak up?

Once we redirect all the elements — guilt, shame, responsibilities, power positions and vulnerable positions — where they belong, the grey zone isn't that grey after all.

We all do have this internal barometer that can help us navigate through situations that leave room for interpretation. Once we pay active attention and reconnect with our internal barometer, we will realise that we do have a very good sense of what is appropriate and what is not, what we are welcoming and actively consenting to and what is crossing our boundaries.

At that same moment we, the authors, recognise that nobody ever told us how sexual harassment develops and how to identify the early warning signs. So we decided to do it ourselves.

THE RED FLAG SYSTEM

Thousands of years of patriarchy have kept us away from the knowledge we need to survive in this world. The binary representation of sexual harassment and the concept of the grey zone prevent us from building an accurate alert system, one that will help us keep ourselves and our sisters safe.

Your personal boundaries are the basis for your personal alert system: where you can naturally detect what makes you feel uncomfortable and what you define as (in)appropriate. Detecting instances where you feel uneasy, learning to acknowledge them (and address these right away) is only one way to identify and fight harassment. We talk more about how to own these perceptions and build on them in our "change the world" section (page 43).

Of course, every person's boundaries are unique and not up for discussion — they are crossed whenever you feel they are and when you decide that something was too much for your taste. But as we were reviewing dozens of stories of sexual harassment from our friends, from our peers at Period. workshops and from the media, we also realised that they all had very clear patterns.

When we are aware of these systematic patterns, it is less likely that we assign the responsibility within ourselves. As soon as we understand that it's not an individual matter and that others feel similarly in these kinds of situations, it is easier to trust our judgement. In other words, it is easier to understand what is really happening and to get help.

We have condensed these patterns into an actionable tool: the Red Flag System. Each red flag can fall in one of the categories below:



Environmental factors:

Sexual harassment can take place anywhere, but people are at higher risk of being harassed in places with strong power dynamics, dependencies or an unchallenged sexist culture.

The Good Guy Syndrome:

“This guy would never do such a thing”. When we highlight someone's great reputation or popularity, making it harder to question their behaviour. This is especially a red flag if others are using reputation to brush off the possibility that someone might be harassing someone else.



Common harassment techniques:

Starting with a compliment, playing “hot and cold”, singling out, being made to feel special, isolating the target, the list goes on. All of these are what we consider “classic techniques” used by harassers to build up harassment.

Our behaviours:

From trying to convince yourself that nothing is going on (even though you have that gut feeling that something is off) to freezing when faced with a certain behaviour, these can be signs that something is wrong.



Some of the red flags we list in this guide are not individually problematic per se. Assaulting someone is always problematic, but complimenting someone is not necessarily so. Whether one single red flag may be a first indicator depends on the circumstances. A compliment is not just harmless fun and games as soon as there are power dynamics at play. Is the one giving the compliment clearly overstepping their role, e.g. your doctor? Your boss? Your teacher? Then the whole picture looks pretty different. Can you distance yourself or refuse the compliment without fear of repercussion? No? Then it's a red flag.

It is important to take several factors into account in order to have a well-functioning alert system. Having only one red flag sets the bar very high and might mean that your alert system reacts too late. If you tell yourself "it's not so bad until they do this despicable thing", you risk overlooking the levels of escalation making it harder to reach out and exit.

Once you start building your Red Flag System, it will be easier for you to take a step back, zoom out of the situation and take time to look at what is happening. The more often we practice it, the easier we will find it to grasp the feeling that something is wrong; to detect problematic behaviour when it evolves. You can decide whether you feel ok or not about what is happening. It will be up to you to decide where to put your boundaries, as opposed to others deciding them for you.

DISCLAIMER: Harassment stems from the harasser's determination to exert control over their targets. We cannot change anything about this determination. Therefore, self-protection is limited, even with very strong and elaborate boundaries.

What these strong boundaries can indeed help with is:

- 1. Not falling into a guilt trap where we blame ourselves.**
 - 2. Acknowledging valid and accurate feelings that are key in identifying harassment.**
 - 3. Reaching out and finding help.**
-

A person is walking away from the camera on a crosswalk. The crosswalk has bold, diagonal red stripes on a dark, textured pavement. The person is wearing dark clothing and their figure is slightly blurred, suggesting motion. The overall scene is dimly lit, with the red stripes providing a strong visual contrast.

Real-life examples

Exercises

Now that you know about the Red Flag System, you can practice it. In this part you will find real-life stories of harassment.

TRIGGER WARNING: This section contains graphic description of sexual harassment and abuse.

There are two versions: a **blank version**, where you can place your own red flags, as well as **our version** with what we — participants of Period* workshops, others who told us about their stories, and ourselves — see as red flags. You can compare them to get a glimpse of the collective sentiment to empower your judgement.

The myths we are fed since childhood have a direct impact on the affected persons' and bystanders' ability to identify and respond to harassment. In order to make most of the stories, check "busting the myths" in the chapter "change the world" (page 59).

The stories don't have an end. That's because we want you to practice identifying harassment in its early stages. In the "change the world" section (page 43) we have prepared suggestions for you.

WRECK THIS GUIDE: when reading the following stories, you can get really interactive.

Each story comes in two versions:

- A blank version with space to underline, take notes, draw... — all kinds of creative outlets.
- Our version with red flags that you can compare with your own. Our red flags are coded with underlinings:



Environmental factors



The Good Guy Syndrome



Common harassment techniques



Our behaviours

DISCLAIMER: Each and every story is based on anonymised real experiences, which we have permission to share. They document either something that happened to ourselves, our friends or another individual.

The professor.

I started my Master's degree and had a renowned, very old professor. He was the most admired professor of our faculty. Students loved him, since he was witty and on a mission to make his students academic stars.

He immediately liked me and praised me for my intellect. He invited me to book presentations and introduced me as one of his most promising and talented students. I interviewed him for my blog and when I sent him the link, he commented that my current profile picture was particularly attractive. In class, he always slightly touched his pants just beneath his belt every time I was talking, as if by chance. I convinced myself these instances were minor, harmless, and I was probably making a big deal out of nothing, so I pushed it aside.

He took me to conferences where he always showed me off. He gave me a present for my birthday and offered to take me to the theatre. I politely declined, but he continued with his strange behaviour.

When we were sitting in the back at a crowded conference, he squeezed himself into a seat next to me and casually put his hand on my knee.

He used to tell me "you're so brilliant, you absolutely need someone to make this talent visible and I'll support you in doing so." He convinced me to submit papers to conferences. He also suggested I proofread a text for him, which ended up with me

writing an anthology for him. Of course, I didn't get paid for my work. The prestige and his renowned name had to do the job: he stressed the fact that this would be the currency in the scientific community and on my CV. The competition at the university was brutal. Without a professor rooting for you, you'd be pretty much lost. I was very well aware of that. And I did know that just as quickly as a professor could push you to the top, he could push you deep down again.

At a conference, at the end of the day, he got incredibly drunk to the point that he needed assistance finding his way back to his hotel room. I even had to enter the card for the room. When we were inside and I just wanted to leave, he came towards me and asked if "we shouldn't try it".

Write your own ending: decide how the story ends.

↓ OUR ANALYSIS

The professor.



GOOD REPUTATION
/SOCIAL PRESTIGE



INEQUALITIES



THE PEDESTAL



BLURRING
THE LINES



SEXUAL
BEHAVIOUR



SELF-
CONVINCING



FAVOURITISM



BLURRING
THE LINES



NOT TAKING NO
FOR AN ANSWER



UNWANTED
PHYSICAL CONTACT

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OUR ANALYSIS ↓

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INEQUALITIES 

TOXIC
ENVIRONMENT 

INVITATION TO A
PRIVATE SPACE 

SEXUAL PROPOSAL 

The colleague.

I got my first job offer straight after university. I'd worked before to pay for my studies, but this was my first "real" job. My family was really proud of me for getting this job, as they had gone to great lengths to support me with my education. As the first generation in my family to attend university, I wanted to let them see that the struggle was paying off. I also needed a job urgently to get out of the constantly precarious situations I was in up until then. The company gave me a six month probationary period during which I still earned little, but the prospect of employment and better pay made me grit my teeth and carry on.

I was flattered and happy when my boss selected me to be on his team and was impressed with my new environment, a large organisation. My boss meanwhile let the rest of the team know that he wanted to hire me, but it wasn't an easy process to run through the administration parcours. A colleague of mine, a senior advisor, jumped in and took care of it. I was very grateful to him for giving me this opportunity that would open doors I wouldn't even have dreamt of previously. My colleague offered to mentor me and I was very keen on learning everything about this. He obviously enjoyed spending time with me. I wanted to keep focused on my work so I didn't want anything to distract me. He invited me to dinner and took me for a beer, something that he would never do with any of the others in my team. At first, the other colleagues were also invited, but somehow it always

ended with us being the only two there. On the one hand I was a little proud of this special position, but on the other hand I never dared to say no if I actually wanted to go home, because I owed him so much.

Little by little he moved from complimenting emails regarding my work to sending me ambiguous text messages virtually non-stop. For example he would text me “#funfact I have handcuffs in my drawer :)” or “I wonder what you would do if you lost our bet and I dared you to sit at your desk naked ;)”.

I couldn't believe my eyes and was extremely uncomfortable when I read that. I tried to avoid talking about it, avoiding confrontation. I hoped the conversation would just move on to something else eventually. He knew I had a boyfriend, so I dismissed it as a casual dig, something that men simply do.

I tried to avoid all his invitations, but he would reschedule right away until I ran out of excuses. One evening he invited me to yet another beer with him. It got late, I was drunk and just wanted to go home.

But every time I tried to call it a night, he would put great effort into persuading me to have another drink with him. I felt like I had provoked this situation, because I hadn't confronted him clearly. It was already late and I wouldn't be able to take the bus home. He was well aware of that and said: “You can't afford to take the taxi home anyway.” I couldn't refuse and so I stayed and became even more drunk.

Write your own ending: decide how the story ends.

↓ OUR ANALYSIS

The colleague.

I got my first job offer straight after university. I'd worked before to pay for my studies, but this was my first "real" job. My family was really proud of me for getting this job, as they had gone to great lengths to support me with my education. As the first generation in my family to attend university, I wanted to let them see that the struggle was paying off. I also needed a job urgently to get out of the constantly precarious situations I was in up until then. The company gave me a six month probationary period during which I still earned little, but the prospect of employment and better pay made me grit my teeth and carry on.



INEQUALITIES

I was flattered and happy when my boss selected me to be on his team and was impressed with my new environment, a large organisation. My boss meanwhile let the rest of the team know that he wanted to hire me, but it wasn't an easy process to run through the administration parcours. A colleague of mine, a senior advisor, jumped in and took care of it. I was very grateful to him for giving me this opportunity that would open doors



THE NEWBIE



INEQUALITIES



THE SAVIOUR

I wouldn't even have dreamt of previously. My colleague offered to mentor me and I was very keen on learning everything about this. He obviously enjoyed spending time with me. I wanted to keep focused on my work so I didn't want anything to distract me. He invited me to dinner and took me for a beer, something that he would never do with any of the others in my team. At first, the other colleagues were also invited, but somehow it always



THE SAVIOUR



SELF-CONVINCING



BLURRING THE LINES



FAVOURITISM

OUR ANALYSIS ↓

ended with us being the only two there. On the one hand I was a little proud of this special position, but on the other hand I never dared to say no if I actually wanted to go home, because I owed him so much.

POLITE ANSWERS 

THE RECIPROCITY TRAP 

INVITATION TO A PRIVATE SPACE & BLURRING THE LINES 

ACCELERATION 

Little by little he moved from complimenting emails regarding my work to sending me ambiguous text messages virtually non-stop. For example he would text me “#funfact I have handcuffs in my drawer :)” or “I wonder what you would do if you lost our bet and I dared you to sit at your desk naked ;).”

SEXUAL COMMENTS 

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SELF-CONVINCING 

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NOT TAKING NO FOR AN ANSWER 

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NOT TAKING NO FOR AN ANSWER 

SELF-BLAME 

THEY KNOW WHAT THEY'RE DOING 

POLITE ANSWERS 

The friend.

We'd been best friends for years. He was a considerate guy, always kind, always listening, a quiet person, even a little shy. While I was in a relationship, he would always point out how he was involuntarily celibate. He used to complain how women* were always just interested in the bad guys and would never give the good guys like him a chance. One day, very abruptly, my girlfriend broke up with me. I was devastated. My world was turned upside down. I had to find a place to stay so my best friend offered me his couch. For two weeks, we used to have hour-long conversations every day about my loss. I enjoyed these so much and he showed empathy and patience even when we went through some feelings over and over again. I felt truly grateful to have such a kind and compassionate friend on my side.

But then, at the end of these two weeks, I did not feel like staying at somebody else's place anymore, I wanted to have some space for myself. I started looking for a small place but it wasn't easy to find something in my price category. I could still feel how exhausted I was, which didn't make the search any easier. I was stuck. Also, I had noticed that something about my friend had changed.

Whenever I'd leave the house, he would ask where I was going. He would accompany me on any of my trips, which I thought was charming at first: he wanted to come with me and help me or even protect me, since he had mentioned that the area was a bit rough even though I had never noticed

anything about it. He texted me 10 times a day to check how I was doing and was becoming a bit jealous when I was meeting my other friends.

My friend started to joke about how the two of us seemed like we'd been married for fifty years. Then he didn't want me to sleep on the couch anymore but share his bed with him. "Don't be ridiculous", he'd say. "I have such a large bed and no girlfriend sleeping in it right now anyway." I didn't want to be weird and make a big deal about it because we were obviously friends, right? Plus, I felt bad denying my friend anything since he let me stay at his place and listened to everything I was going through. So I reluctantly ended up sharing the bed with him. One night I was feeling devastated about my breakup again. Suddenly he moved really close and his face was just before mine. He said "maybe your new person is already closer to you than you think". I was shell-shocked. The voice in my head screamed "what the hell is going on?!" when he leaned in to kiss me. This was when I stopped him. He looked bewildered and said "don't you think that after we've been caring so much about your needs, it's my turn now?"

Write your own ending: decide how the story ends.

↓ OUR ANALYSIS

The friend.



THE FRIEND ZONE



THE FRIEND ZONE



THE FRIEND ZONE



INEQUALITIES



THE SAVIOUR

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INEQUALITIES



GUT FEELING



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THE NEWBIE

OUR ANALYSIS ↓

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ACCELERATION 

BLURRING
THE LINES 

CALLING YOU
A KILLJOY 

THE RECIPROCITY
TRAP 

UNWANTED
PHYSICAL CONTACT 

THE FRIEND ZONE 

THE RECIPROCITY
TRAP 

The doctor.

I am a woman* of colour who had just moved to a new city. I needed a dental treatment quite urgently but I didn't know any dentist in my new city. A colleague at work recommended a dentist to me because he was nearby and "did the job", so I booked an appointment.

When I went to the dental surgery, he was the only one there. As he opened the door, I already felt like he was looking at me insistently. He escorted me to the treatment room. He explained the treatment to me, and started to tell me a lot about his personal life: where he was from, his family, his wife, where they got married... at first I thought he was trying to divert my attention from the treatment and some eventual pain. But then he started to ask me very some personal questions: he asked about the ring I was wearing, whether I was going to marry soon, who I was going to marry... I felt like he was getting too close and invading my privacy. But as he had told me all these things about himself, I felt I had to reciprocate.

After I thought it was finally over, he told me I should come back two weeks later for the second part. I felt uncomfortable, but could not really explain why. I was worried that I couldn't change doctors and go to another doctor with half the treatment done. I brushed off the odd feeling, thinking that I was being too sensitive because he was probably just trying to have a friendly chat. I booked the second appointment.

At the second appointment, he remembered everything I had said about my boyfriend, my vision of marriage... He started to talk about roles in marriage, how he wished he was young again and at this stage in a relationship again. As he was performing the treatment, I started to feel sharp pain and I asked him to pause. He laughed and said “Oh come on, I thought women* like you like it rough” and winked at me. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing but couldn’t do anything as he was continuing with the procedure.

Then, after he had finished, he started making remarks — and giving me a rather gross look. He gave me a mirror to look at the result and when he had handed it over, he started touching my shoulders, as he said I was now “perfect from the outside and the inside”. The next second, he had moved his hands up to my neck, and started massaging it, casually explaining that he was just checking my muscle tension. I froze.

Write your own ending: decide how the story ends.

↓ OUR ANALYSIS

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OUR ANALYSIS ↓

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THE GOOD
OLD TIMES 

PRETEXTING CULTURAL
DIFFERENCE &
CALLING YOU
A KILLJOY 

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UNWANTED
PHYSICAL CONTACT 

SEXUAL COMMENT 

UNWANTED
PHYSICAL CONTACT 

RED FLAGS GLOSSARY

Environmental factors

Before you look at behaviours, take a step back and check the environment you are in.

Inequalities

Economic inequality, drastic hierarchies, low income, an insecure job, age, depending on someone for survival (financially, for housing, for food), if someone can “destroy your career anytime” — all these drastically affect your ability to react and act.

The newbie

As a newcomer, you can be in a vulnerable position because:

- You do not know the rules by which the system operates, so you are willing to learn them and adapt as quickly as possible. It makes it easy to those in power to make you believe that whatever they want is how the game works. And if you don't play along, your position is at stake.
- You want to prove yourself or you want to please others and be liked, so you are willing to go the extra mile. This encourages thinking according to “whatever's going happen, I'm going to work through it”. This creates an environment where you find yourself accepting some behaviours you may not accept otherwise.
- You don't know anyone. This lack of a support system makes you additionally vulnerable.



Toxic environment

These are environments where it is difficult to speak out, have different kinds of perspectives that are respected, or challenge/question people's behaviour. This can be because of a prevalent sexist culture or even high competition (people are more focused on their own success than on checking up on their peers and show solidarity).

The good guy syndrome

When we talk about “the Good Guy Syndrome”†, we mean how people with a reputation of being particularly nice can hide behind a smokescreen. We know from reading hundreds of stories that often harassers are people who are trusted and valued in society. This image has high credibility, and people like to believe it, which makes it significantly more difficult to prove that this popular person is a harasser.



The friend zone

This is a dangerous and heteronormative construct where allegedly nice guys feel that they have the right to a girlfriend and sex because they have provided emotional support or simply been “nice”. There is no such thing as a bank account where you make a deposit in the form of emotional support/friendly services and can later expect to get sex out of it. This is a shady construct which is trying to make sex a question of debt.

Good reputation/social prestige

A person everyone likes, who “would never do that” because they have so many witnesses for their nice behaviour, will always be seen in a positive light. It is hard to associate a popular and well-liked person with horrible actions, which makes it even more difficult for the ones affected to speak up and convince those around. This is even more a red flag if others are using someone’s good reputation to excuse their behaviour or reject someone’s complaint against harassment.

† Even though we call it here “the Good Guy Syndrome”, this category of red flags can apply to all genders.

Harassers' actions

Here is a list of the common harassment techniques we identified while analysing stories of harassment. They are not in a chronological order and can be used simultaneously.



Starting with a compliment

This can be a classic method to pave the way for harassment. Even if it is not exactly appropriate or pleasant, you will find it harder to question someone's behaviour if they seem to be "nice" to you. If you like the other person and they are on the same level as you, you might enjoy getting a compliment. But you do not want it from someone who is in a position of power and compliments your physical appearance rather than your work, for example.

The pedestal

A common pattern among manipulative harassers is to elevate you to a high level at first. They may praise you and show some extraordinary enthusiasm for your work and/or personality. This enthusiasm binds you to the person — especially when you're new to an environment, insecure, inexperienced, or don't know many people. This is meant to create emotional dependency: first the harasser makes sure you get used to this. They know you will seek approval to feed your self-confidence.

Favouritism

When someone is making you "the special one" by doing with you things they would not do with others, for example going for drinks, inviting you and only you to an event. This special position may seem attractive at first, but the flipside of the coin is that this alienates and isolates you from the rest of the group. It is a way to single you out, making it harder for you to reach out. It often leads to a guilt trap: while you feel flattered at first, you may not dare to speak up when it starts to feel uncomfortable, as you may be ashamed of having enjoyed your status as "the special one" up until then.

The good old times

Referring to their own youth and their "wild experiences" can be a way to lure you and put you under pressure to share more private information.

The saviour

If someone is jumping in to “save” you or offer you something that sounds too good to be true, it might not be genuine at all. We remember another story in which a friend of ours received a job offer that didn't sound like a job at all, more like everything she ever dreamt of, all at once. She was thrilled at first but soon after she expressed her interest, the dynamic switched and became more than fishy. The dream job offer turned out to be a way to lure her into the sphere of influence of someone who had completely different intentions. If you find yourself in a similar situation, keep your eyes open - there might be a trade-off.

Playing hot and cold

Being adorable with someone at one moment and absolutely horrible in the next is a way to make people emotionally dependent. When your behaviour is praised in one moment and extremely belittled in the next, a lot of confusion is created. In this state of insecurity, it is easier to exert control over a person. Such behaviour generates a lot of psychological pressure and makes it difficult to classify as it is unpredictable.

Blurring the lines

This can be between friendship and relationship, or between professional and private life. With blurred lines, it is more difficult to classify on which terrain you are currently moving: is this still work-related or actually already very private? Is this still buddy-like or already intimate and not just friendly any more? These boundaries are increasingly and deliberately shifted, for example in a work context, in companies that like to pretend to be a large family and that all their employees are friends. This dynamic opens up more and more potential grey areas for a harasser. When the lines are blurred, it becomes more difficult to refer to fixed rules such as codes of conduct that might keep you safe.

The reciprocity trap

You feel like you owe the person something because they have done something for you. Because of this favour you may have a hard time denying the person something — even though their favour might be completely unrelated to what they want in return.

Invitation to a private space

Whether it's their house/hotel room or switching the medium/platform of communication (e.g. from formal email to a more casual/private messenger), this contributes to blurring the lines and taking the interaction away from the public eye. In those more isolated spaces, they feel unobserved and can exercise full control. Be aware that this is often used against those who complain against harassment: “if she did not want it, why did she accept the invitation?”

Acceleration

It seems that suddenly, something changed. The dynamic is shifting, and things are going so fast you cannot recalibrate or put your finger on it. You want to restore the previous state, you put extra strain on yourself, but that doesn't happen anymore. When they start dragging you down, you cannot let them go. This is because you rely on them to lift you up again.

Not taking no for an answer

In healthy social relationships, people should accept that when you say "no", it's no. If your "no" is played down and the person does it all the more, if they become aggressive when you confront them, if they put you under pressure when you cancel on them, not letting you get away but immediately setting a new date, not giving you any possible way out... it's a red flag.

Pretexting cultural difference

Harassers use "cultural differences" as an excuse when confronted about inappropriate behaviour, with the pretext that their behaviour is normal "where they come from". This helps them to silence the other person, trivialising their behaviour and allowing them to continue undisturbed. It can also be expectations placed on you that you are by default okay with a behaviour because of your culture, origin or other identity factors (for example: women of colour are according to colonial exoticisation myths supposed to "like it rough").

Calling you a killjoy

That's a way to silence your resistance and deny you the right to establish your boundaries.

They know what they're doing

When the person is not even trying to hide that they are cornering you or harassing you, and even says it openly and/or makes jokes about it, it's a red flag.

Sexual look/behaviour/comment/proposal

If you are not explicitly consenting to a sexual look, behaviour, comment or proposal, if you have not asked for it, or if don't have the possibility to say "no" without repercussions, then it's definitely a red flag. Outside of a consensual relationship of a sexual nature, they are inappropriate. In our research, we noticed these actions of a sexual nature often seemed to emerge out of the blue or in very inappropriate contexts (e.g. a text at work). This is also a way to create surprise and reduce your ability to say no.

Unwanted physical contact

The trivialisation of unwanted physical contact and sexual violence alienates us from our bodies and our boundaries. But whether it's somebody casually touching you without your consent, assaulting you or raping you, it is unacceptable (and generally illegal).

Your behaviours & reactions

The behaviours and/or reactions of somebody who is being harassed are never the cause of harassment. We do think however that the way you react holds information. Your response to an unpleasant comment, behaviour or situation is your intuition trying to alert you that something's off. We have internalised victim blaming to a point that we silence our reactions to something that interfere with our integrity and trivialise our feelings. We want to take a close look at these behaviours here and understand them as an indicator that there is a problem.



Self-convincing

This is a spectrum that ranges from brushing it off to refusing to believe it's true, even if you know it to be a fact. Self-convincing can look like the following, or start with one of these and then move on to another:

- You are brushing it off.
- You are trying to convince yourself that your harasser's actions are harmless, incidental, or that you are oversensitive, exaggerating, or even making it up. In other words, you are putting a lot of emotional labour into making an uncomfortable situation disappear from your mind.
- You are internally bargaining with your own feelings.
- You are denying how you feel.
- You are making a great effort to excuse the other person's behaviour.

Gut feeling

Your body can sometimes try to warn you that something is off. It can be in your stomach, your chest, or even an inner voice talking to yourself. You can't do anything wrong if you pay attention to what those signals have to say to you. It can take time to recover that capacity, especially if you have survived harassment or abuse. See page 47 for tips on how to do that.

Auto-silencing

When you are actively trying to silence yourself, and making sure no one knows about what is going on, then something's probably going on. Stereotypes play a great role here. We want people to be interested in us for who we are, not because of what we look like or because they expect to get sexual favours from us. Unfortunately, in a patriarchal world, we are yet to get there: women of colour are assumed to want wild sex, successful women "got there" because they slept with the boss, if we are nice to a guy then we must have sex with him... On one hand, we are blamed for this; on the other hand, this is automatically assumed. So there is no way out: in all cases, we do it wrong. Gender stereotypes label us as unworthy and take away our legitimacy to be here, to stand up for ourselves and to speak out.

Polite answers

You may answer politely because you do not want to hurt their feelings. By avoiding confrontation and manoeuvring around the problem, you hope to make it go away. Because we have been socialised to suspect good intentions, and often feel obliged to respond to such behaviour, we often swallow the initial feeling that that's not really appropriate.

Self-blame

Remember: unless you explicitly asked for it, you did not. If you find yourself pointing to your responsibility for something someone is doing to you, it's a red flag.

Freezing

This is your brain protecting you against severe psychological and/or physical harm, especially when it comes to situations of unwanted physical attention or when you're caught off-guard. It is a very common reaction and there is no reason to feel bad or guilty about it. Just be aware that such reaction very likely indicates something is going on².



Change the world

Tools

This is the practical part of the guide. Here we introduce strategies that have worked for us and people in our network in the past. They are contextual, so they may or may not work for you. But the more you practice, the more you will know what you can do, where and how. Do not worry if it doesn't work for the first time. From building your boundaries to counter-speech, it's a long way to go and it works best if you have people around to make you feel supported and empowered.

CHANGE THE WORLD

BREAK THE SILENCE, NO. 1: **Yourself**

Remember: there is no ONE solution to tackle and end harassment. It's a complicated matter and has to be targeted from various directions with diverse strategies. It's a matter that concerns us all.

When we have various allies — human resources, colleagues, friends — and different approaches, our chances of ending this are much higher.

But we can't stress this enough: we are socialised to not respect our boundaries, blame ourselves, not trust our judgement, and get along — all this in order to not “make a scene” and please others. It takes a long way to get those patterns out of our minds, as they were planted deep in our brains. As you're reading this, you've already come a long way. You're already at the starting point. And yet: it's one thing to know it, but it's a different thing altogether to practice it.

The very first step is to acknowledge that this isn't just in your head. This is happening. This is real. Breaking the silence starts with recognising your own experiences and those of other people around you as being valid.

First things first: consent

A few words about consent:

- You did not ask for something unless you literally, explicitly asked for it.
- Consenting to A does not mean you automatically consent to X.
- You can withdraw your consent at any time: because your boundaries are fluid, because what felt like a good idea initially suddenly looks like a bad one, or simply because you changed your mind.
- Consent should be enthusiastic.
- You cannot consent if you are under pressure, drunk, unconscious.

Two resources we recommend on consent:

“WOULD YOU LIKE SOME TEA?”

HAVE A LOOK AT THE “TEA CONSENT” VIDEO³: WE LIKE IT BECAUSE IT EXPLAINS CONSENT IN VERY SIMPLE TERMS



LEARNING GOOD CONSENT BY CINDY CRABB

“THERE IS NO ONE DEFINITION OF CONSENT. DEFINING CONSENT IS A PERSONAL PROCESS, AS YOU THINK ABOUT THE SITUATIONS YOU DON'T EVER WANT TO BE IN AGAIN”

Check your boundaries

Do you find yourself saying “yes” automatically to things that you don’t actually want to do? Do you say “yes” out of politeness, or because of a lack of an alternative option? Because we do. We do that so much that we get to a point where we are not even sure what we are, or are not okay with, what we want and what we do not want.

To counter this, you can start by observing yourself.

Think about social interactions where:

- You felt uneasy, uncomfortable when wanting to say “yes” or “no”.
- You said “yes” when deep down you wanted to say “no”.
- You did not say “no”, even though you wanted to.
- You said “no” and it felt good.
- You said “yes” and it felt good.

Start a **“boundaries journal”** to keep track of your observations. You will get to know your boundaries and learn to reconnect with your inner sense of what you are okay or not okay with. With time it can help you notice much earlier what you feel about certain interactions and to be able to consent enthusiastically — or on the contrary, say “no”.

Boundaries do not have to be built in reaction to what others do. It is healthy to decide for yourself, and you have the power to do so. Here are some questions to guide your reflection:

- How would you like your boundaries to look like to others?
- What would you feel comfortable with?
- Would you like your boundaries to be walls, ditches, hedges, fences through which you can see, but which clearly say that here begins your territory?
- Would you like to have metre-high fences between you and others, or a simple line in the sand? Is this different with different people in your life?
- Imagine what it would feel like to say no/yes. How much space would it create for you?

HOW
WOULD YOU
LIKE YOUR
BOUNDARIES
TO BE?

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Building and respecting your boundaries is a process and a matter of practice. If this feel like too much to you, you can start with smaller steps:

- Say "no" to something where the stakes are low.
- Put the distance you feel comfortable with one person at a time.
- Pay attention to how people react.
- Once you have figured out what kind of boundary/fence/wall/line in the sand you'd feel comfortable with, apply them in real life by acting according to the distance your boundary puts between you and the other person.

REMEMBER: You have all the rights to have different boundaries from other people. For instance, some people like to give hugs, others don't. If someone forces you to give them a hug, that would be a breach of your boundary and you have every right to refuse.

TIP: Check your boundaries in private and professional contexts.

You can have different standards in your private and in your working life. That's okay and appropriate. You might feel cool with something in your private life that is a breach of your integrity in a work context. For example, you might be a touchy-feely person with your friends, but do not want to — and should not — be touched at work. When these spheres merge, it can create insecurity. It's your workplace. It's not your private sphere. It's not free of hierarchies and power dynamics. You can't simply walk away from it. Be aware of this dynamic.

Trust your judgement

Your own perception of a situation is often dismissed, but it can be a powerful source of information. Your intuition is a combination of experiences you have had in the world and your knowledge about yourself, your personal space and when your integrity is violated or in danger of being violated. This is a powerful tool. Respect it. Trust your gut. Remember: nobody knows you better than yourself. You are the highest authority on yourself.

When you feel that something is odd – well, it most likely is. Pay attention to what your body tells you: it could be a knot in your stomach, an inner pressure, an overall tension or a general sense of discomfort. Learn the ways your body alerts you when something is going on.

It can take time to recover that capacity, especially for those of us who have survived harassment, manipulation, abuse or assault and/or have mental health issues. It's important to be kind to yourself when practising connecting with your intuition, and if possible work on it within the framework of therapy or psychosocial support. You do not have to go through this alone.

TIP: Whenever our body sends us an alert, we tend to rush into rationalising and over-analysing in order to make the feeling go away. Pay attention to when you are doing that and remember that you are allowed to pause for a moment before you decide or react. Tell the person you will think about their proposition. Take a break. Give your feelings room to breathe. Give this voice inside of you some space in order to hear what it has to say. It might tell you that things are fucked up.

Build your own alert system

In this guide, we presented our very own Red Flag System, which is composed of environmental factors, the harassers' behaviours ("Good Guy Syndrome" or "classic techniques" red flags) or our own reactions which give us an indication that something is going on (the "your reactions" red flags — see page 41). These can help you to gain an understanding of how harassment builds up over time. They can be a basis for building your very own Red Flag System; one that takes into account external factors as well as internal ones. To scan your environment, you can start by asking yourself the following questions: who feels powerful in my surrounding and why? Who feels powerless and why? Which factors make it easy for harassers to get away with anything? Who are the ones who can easily become targets? What are the conditions that escalate harassing behaviour? Is a situation where you set a red flag a one time thing? Or does it keep building up?

As an extension to a **boundaries journal**, start a **red flag journal**. This is a tool to keep track of a specific situation or interaction with others. When someone crosses a line or simply makes you feel uncomfortable, when you experience a subtle transgression or ambiguity, mark it for yourself as a red flag. Take a mental note, or even write it down, then see if something else comes up. When you keep track of the red flags and have the patterns on paper, it is easier to see them for what they are and to stop doubting yourself. When you see the factors combined in black and white and look at the entire system in its chronology, you will know when something isn't happening "by accident" anymore.

Cross-check

Any of our stories have been experienced by tons of people on the internet. Just type in: "intern harassed by boss", "sexual harassment and friend", even "sexual harassment by dentist" (when we wrote that story, we could not believe this was actually a thing). It happens. Reading others' stories really helps you get your perspective straight. You're not exaggerating or oversensitive. Go to different types of sources. There is material. You're not alone. Ask your friends, make sure there is a sense of awareness among people you're already close to. It opens up the topic, especially if you're at a point of escalation and it's not the first time harassment has come up.

This is also helpful when you are in a new situation. People who are new in a system — work, education, city... — are particularly vulnerable and can easily become targets. They feel they need to adapt as soon as possible to the rules of the new system, without checking first if the rules are genuine or if they are okay with them. Getting information from various sources can really help you figure out how things are supposed to be. If you have more information, you feel more empowered to set your boundaries and needs against others who may exploit them, because then you know that it should actually be different.

EXTRA TIP: List the things you are afraid of.

Reflect on what exactly prevents you from speaking out and seeking help. Is it shame? Retaliation? Losing your job/friend/lover? Being called a killjoy?

If you can't talk through your fears, write them down. Some of them might look more manageable on paper than when they're just in your head. You can even research how to address your fears. Others might have had that problem too and could provide helpful insights. However hopeless your situation may feel in the moment, there is a solution.

Find a vocabulary

Language creates reality — as soon as you have words for a situation, it's easier to grasp. Harassers often frame something in a certain way: flirting, flattering, joking or even attraction. Also, find a vocabulary for what goes on inside of you, what words you can use to describe your perceptions and your intuition. Try to be very concise when you describe what's going on.

EXAMPLES: That wasn't flirting. Flirting is consensual. Flirting is fun. He didn't ask me if I wanted that. It wasn't fun for me. He made me feel uncomfortable. I felt like I didn't have a choice.

Is this necessary?

If you have difficulties putting words on what you are experiencing, take a step back and ask yourself: Is it necessary?

By asking if something — a comment on your profile picture, switching from emails to texts or a messenger app, an unconsented move — is really necessary, you break the whole personal involvement spiral that might make it hard to analyse the situation. You put yourself in a more distant position, like an observing bystander. This distant point of view can give you more clarity as it doesn't take all the complicated social implications into account. When somebody constantly does something that isn't *necessary*, the person is overstepping the limits of their role, it's a red flag.

BREAKING THE SILENCE, NO. 2: Towards others

DISCLAIMER: Not everybody can speak up. Power relations, the environment you're in, the possibility of retaliation, your traumas, your mental or physical (dis)ability(ies), your social position, your identity... All of these factors have an influence. Don't feel bad if you didn't come up with the reactions you would have liked to have had. Sexual harassment builds up over time, which makes it harder to see and to counter. The important thing is to know a range of different strategies that you can choose from, and find out which ones work best for you. Everybody confronts harassment in their own ways. The most important thing is security and self-preservation. Whatever you feel comfortable with is okay. We know it can feel very intimidating, maybe even impossible. We have been socialised to not speak up for ourselves or others. It takes time and practice to build up the confidence needed to speak up; it's a process. The more often you practice different strategies, the more likely it is that you will incorporate them up to a level in which you can automatically apply them in a given situation.

However, when we are in a position to do so — especially as bystanders — we can and should speak up. When you are a bystander, you are in a position of privilege just because you are not the primary target. Check your privilege and use it. It is important to keep in mind that you don't have to change the system all alone, especially if you are not in a position of power. But there are different levels on which you can get active, and even in the least powerful position, we can still address the affected person and look out for help — we are responsible for this all together.

Practice opposition

We are not buying into the mainstream idea that “you could just have said no” (see the myth page 64). Unfortunately, we know that sometimes “no” is not enough, or not possible, and we need to find another strategy.

Very often, the ones experiencing harassment only speak up when a really big event has happened or when things become absolutely unbearable. We don't have to wait to step up until things become extremely bad or obvious before stepping up. In some cases, saying “no” might work. In those cases, openly addressing when a boundary is crossed early on (even the first time) is really much easier than waiting. The moment something is odd, bring it to the table.

Say “you make me feel uncomfortable” and then describe and list all the instances. Don’t let them gaslight you with their “good intentions”: just insist on how it made you feel and that it needs to stop. This doesn’t have to be right away. It’s also okay to come back later on and say “hey, what you did earlier made me uncomfortable”.

Often when we are thrown into this kind of situation, we freeze. But we can prepare ourselves and can become able to better assess situations. For example: you can go through possible situations mentally and think about possible reactions. Take your first red flag of the stories in the previous section of the guide and practice reactions. The more you practice, the less likely you are to get caught off guard.

EXTRA TIP: Redirect responsibility

We’ve learnt that harassers push boundaries. So we want to practice opposing those attempts early on. When people try to blur your boundaries or try to make you look like a killjoy for not wanting to play along, they want you to feel ashamed so that you will give in after all. But remember: it’s not your fault when somebody crosses your boundary, so you can hit the ball right back, e.g. by saying: “Do you realise that I’ve been telling you “no” repeatedly?” “So you’re one of those who can’t accept a “no”?” In some cases, this might change the dynamic: the guilt flips — you are no longer the one who has to justify yourself. Instead it is the harasser who has to. **IMPACT:** You make it clear that you know, that your eyes are open and that you are aware of what is going on and where your personal boundaries are.

DISCLAIMER: Safety and self-preservation come first. Do this in an environment where you have allies and people you can count on if such an encounter takes a bad turn. Inform yourself about the consequences harassers face in your environment. Try and find someone you trust to practice counter-speech with.

Talk to someone

Speaking out is also important for victims: Finding someone to confide in is key to getting out of a situation of harassment. But not everyone out there will be able to give you the support you need. Here is some guidance on how to choose that person:

- Someone you truly trust: safety is key. You do not want the person to then go on and tell your story to others.
- Someone who recognises sexual harassment as a problem.
- Someone who will listen to you: by listening, we mean

actively listening. They should be considerate, sensitive, not jump to conclusions, and first and foremost, prioritise what you need and what you want to do.

- Someone external to the system: because they will not follow the internal logic, won't have conflicts of interest or loyalty, and won't have to bargain with rules they might have integrated themselves. They should be able to give you a detached and sensible point of view on the situation. They are more likely to have a common-sense approach to this, which might help you to get your perspective, and they are less likely to normalise the situation.
- Consider age: other generations might not be as aware of the devastating consequences of harassment, or may have been conditioned to brush them aside (even more than our own generation has).

If you can, find several people to talk to and build yourself a support network.

Look out for the missing stair

The missing stairs concept illustrates how people know about a person's misconduct, but instead of fixing the problem, try to adapt to it and silently inform each other about the "missing stair", i.e. the harasser. While knowing it is wrong, everybody accepts that the harasser is "just like that" and builds up elaborate schemes to work around the harasser's inexcusable behaviour. The environment thus contributes to the maintenance of an intolerable condition and ensures that the misconduct has no consequences. Ultimately, the bystanders leave potentially affected people exposed to the harassers.⁴

Bystander Intervention

The popular notion that everything that happens in the grey zone is playful tension is dangerous. If we play along with that idea, it'll be even harder to break out of it when it's not fun and games anymore. If we tell somebody who feels uncomfortable to "cheer up", if we excuse Joe from work who cracks sexist jokes with a shrug and a "that's the way he is", we might grant him worse transgressions. We let the harasser know that we are on their side. We tolerate such behaviour and the person who is harassed will get no help leaving those potentially targeted alone and vulnerable.

In fact, harassers know very well how to use the grey zone to their advantage and often "test how far they can go by starting with inappropriate comments or touches"⁵ in public. That's why early intervention is so important.

Bystanders — people who are witnessing harassment — can make a real difference in situations of harassment when they become active. In most of the stories we heard, a single person could have prevented a lot of harm if they had stood up and taken decisive action. And bystanders might not be aware of the full extent of the sexual harassment, even if they are aware of conduct and behaviour. We as a community have to be better and understand our responsibility in being witnesses. Remember that harassment and assault also take place in allegedly "socially progressive" or "open" environments, and that external representation is no indication of how they will deal with misconduct. Quite to the contrary, it might be even more difficult to address the topic in this kind of environment since it cannot possibly occur there.

What can you do to be an active bystander? Show that your eyes are wide open. Make clear that you will not tolerate sexual harassment. Talk about it. Yes, it is uncomfortable to be so vocal, but it sure is better than having to compromise. And you relieve those affected of an enormous burden. Spread the fact that this is not a private thing, but about power, and a public matter that concerns us all.

Here are some techniques you can use to intervene:

LEARN TO READ A ROOM

Sharpen your eyes for power, dominance and self-promotion, and look out for those at the bottom of the social pyramid.

KEEP IT PUBLIC

Talk about harassers' behaviour openly and always oppose it when you see it.

DON'T LET THEM BE ALONE

Invite yourself into so-called private situations or conversations that you know are putting someone at risk.

SHARE INFORMATION

Someone is known for bad conduct? Share it (but be wary of creating "missing stairs": if you are in a position to something about it, do it). We have heard several stories where people stressed how knowing they were not the only ones would have been vital for distancing themselves earlier.

HOLD ON TO IT

Check in on them regularly, signal that you are there for them and that they can trust you — on their terms.

TALK TO THE ONE TARGETED

Offer support: "how are you, really?" "I noticed (given behaviour) and wanted to tell you that I saw it". Acknowledging a situation may make them realise that it was inappropriate, or help them understand that you have been paying attention. Be an active listener, tell them that they are not responsible for what happened. Point out possibilities and resources.

BUILD A BUDDY SYSTEM

Watch out for newbies and prepare to be there for your friends, colleagues, neighbours.

SNOWBALL EFFECT

Keep in mind that you may start small, but you can have a huge impact.

USE YOUR PRIVILEGE

Understand how your age, status, skin colour, position — or even only that you're not the target — empower you to be an ally.⁶

IT'S NEVER TOO LATE TO DO SOMETHING

Even if you've looked away 20 times, or decided against talking to the one affected, step in the 21st time.

CONFRONT THE HARASSER

If you are in the position to speak out, do it. If you have seen something and are in a position of power, maybe even the harasser's superior, don't hesitate to act, and make sure your employees are safe immediately.

Be aware of the effects of favouritism: when a superior is putting one person on a pedestal, in a special position, it not only singles that person out, it also encourages competition and suspicion from others. It deters people from intervening and asking "how are you?" — therefore leaving possible targets to their own devices and vulnerable.

If you go back to the stories, you will see that often there are people in the beginning — then the social surrounding gradually disappears. Note that this is part of the system — harassers isolate their targets. Keep your eyes open for this dynamic. These people are possible bystanders.:

- Professor's story: other students, faculty staff, people attending the conferences.
- Colleague's story: the boss, other colleagues.
- Friend's story: other friends, neighbours.
- Dentist's story: other patients, secretary.

Find your community

Addressing harassment will not only happen through individual action. Having a space where we can talk about our experiences, be truly listened to and without fear of being judged is very important.

Support networks, sisterhoods, feminist collectives: all play a great role in the fight against abuse, violence and harassment. We are aware that depending on where you live, or how your initial social network looks like, this might seem difficult. You can also find your community online, through forums or Facebook groups for example.

BREAKING THE SILENCE, NO. 3: **Report**

We are painfully aware of what it costs to report such a dreadful experience. Often, survivors have no direct access to information about how to report, or do not have the mental or emotional capacity to look for this information. Many do not report at all, out of fear, because they are overwhelmed and would not even know where to begin. We figured that it can be very helpful to know about the individual steps of reporting and not to feel overwhelmed by the totality, where you don't know where to start, what infrastructure there is, potential gateways and what you can do to help yourself and others.

DISCLAIMER: We are not preaching about reporting here. The most important thing is your well-being. Reporting should be your personal decision: nobody should push you towards it, and nobody should prevent you from doing it. Know that you deserve all the solidarity and support in the world, so if you decide to report, do not hesitate to reach out for helping hands and to gather a support network.

We want you to be able to make an informed decision about reporting. A common fear is that once you report, you have no control over what is happening. Know that usually, you do not necessarily automatically trigger an official complaint process simply by reporting. There are usually several stages that you must pass through. And there are different ways to find solutions at each stage.

It is your right to insist on the variant that is least harmful to you and least demanding on you. Inform yourself about the conditions of filing an official complaint and if you are in a position of power, make this information publicly available to others: can you simply go on the record and decide further steps later on, is a consultation with human resources or a lawyer possible, are those around you... In order to feel safer about reporting, you need to:

- Be aware that you have control over the process.

- Know that information will not be communicated to someone else or made public against your will.
- Know that you will not have to face a confrontation with the harasser when reporting (right away).
- Know you will be taken seriously.

Document

Even if it's the first instance you notice, even if you do not know whether you will report, even if you are not sure something is going on: document. Whatever happens, you do not know what you want to do later on, or what you will be able to do once you are not in a psychologically demanding situation anymore. Document everything for potential further steps in the future.

EXTRA TIP: Send a text to yourself or your trust person in real time. "Probably the most effective thing you can do (...) is to record details in real time. (...) Memories fade over time; even over a couple of days, you forget details (...). Send a text to yourself — that's a good way of making sure you remember the details that may become important."

This tip is also crucial for bystanders!

Analyse your options

We know very well how overwhelmed you may feel when thinking about future steps. The best way to counter that is to think it through with your trust person. Together, assess the situation, research and get organised.

We want you to be prepared. That's why we cannot stress this enough: you do not have to do this alone. Ask for help from your trust person or support network.

1. Learn about the reporting procedure

Knowing what is ahead of you is key so that you can psychologically prepare yourself for it.

Here are some questions to guide you: are there different pathways to reporting? What happens if you report officially, if you submit an official claim? Can you go to the police or do you need to go through mediation first? What is expected from you at each step of the way? What documents do you need to submit? What is the timeline for each step?

2. Look for extra support and advice

It is useful to turn to people or organisations who have strong expertise on harassment but are outside of your system.

Look out for feminist organisations and collectives, women's rights organisations, survivor networks where you live. If you cannot find any, you can turn to helplines for victims of harassment, sexual violence, or even violence in general. They have a wealth of knowledge and experience. They can inform you on the law or the procedures available to you, tell you what has worked for survivors in the past (and what has not). Very important too: they can point you to medical professionals (doctors, psychologists...) who are safe and know how to work with victims of harassment.

Even if they might not have the specific methods for your case, they may be in touch with organisations or people that do. You may want to check their values first before your approach them to make sure they will support you (e.g. are they intersectional? Do they support trans women?)

3. Do a power analysis

An unfortunate truth we have to face is that the system will not work for us. You will have to make it work for you. Do not blindly trust people who might have other loyalties or may pass on information to other people.

Be aware of the fact that members of a given system — your workplace, organisation, friendship, university — might not be allies because:

- They are all subject to the same logic and rules of the system, and so will often show greater loyalty to the system rather than change something about it.
- They may feel like challenging the system means challenging themselves and their own place in that system — and that they cannot or do not want to bear this. It also means looking at how they have been complicit to situations of harassment, which is uncomfortable.
- They may feel like challenging the logic of the system would mean changing it all, which seems like an impossible task (even if used only as a pretext).
- As painful as it sounds, people are often not willing to challenge a whole system for one person (even if it is more than one person affected and even if this makes the whole system toxic, unhealthy and dangerous), especially if they benefit from it.

If you decide to talk about your case of harassment to

somebody who is in the same system, try to make a short “power analysis” beforehand. Ask yourself: what are the strings of power? Who might have an interest in sharing your story, perhaps in a way that could do you harm? Find people who are not inclined to share your story in a destructive way but who feel committed to you and your well-being.

Find witnesses

If somebody witnesses you being sexually harassed, ask them to write this down. Think about people who have witnessed instances. If you feel safe enough to break the silence towards others, you might find out that there were other stories, that the perpetrator has a reputation and word about them is out on the street. If this is the case, write all these incidences down to build your case.

Be prepared for backlash

When we are reporting sexual harassment or talking about it with somebody else, we unfortunately cannot always expect thorough understanding and the empathy we deserve. A good way is to go through all the possible scenarios for how the conversation could progress beforehand. When we prepare ourselves, we are less likely to be caught off-guard easily.

EXTRA TIP: Bring another person

People act differently when there is another person in the room — it changes the dynamics from something personal between you and the harasser to something more public.

Going public

Some people who get harassed decide to go public about their harassers. Things you should keep in mind when you want to do so: talk to journalists who care more about your safety and your wishes than about a story. Talk to people who can make an informed interpretation of the subject, who explain the different steps of the process to you and tell you that you can withdraw your story at any time. There is a lot of public interest in “juicy details”, so be alert if journalists ask you for that kind of thing and are not as interested in showing what is wrong about the bigger picture.⁸

Change the culture around harassment: busting the myths

Fighting harassment also comes through changing the culture. From a very young age, society feeds us with myths about harassment based on victim-blaming and rape culture. They promote the idea that victims are responsible for whatever happens to them, and harassers can get away with pretty much anything. It is important to make ourselves aware of the fact that the beliefs we hold for growing up in this society are often based on the male perspective. Be careful if someone wants to present you with an allegedly "easy fix". If there was a simple way to deal with sexual harassment or to get out of such a situation, we would have already found it.

It is our responsibility to bust these myths whenever we hear them. Here you will find the main myths about sexual harassment and a few key tools to start countering them.

"BEWARE OF THE MEN HIDING IN THE BUSHES"

The first (and probably last) thing women are taught about sexual harassment is that the danger comes from the outside. The trope is as old as time: we should be wary of the dangerous stranger hiding in the bushes, or in the dark alley, ready to jump out and rape their victim at any time. Public discourses, shaped predominantly by men, often imply that it's only a special kind of man that is a dangerous perpetrator. They are always "the other", which is often linked with racist assumptions. It is almost always men of colour, someone who is foreign, external. At the same time, it erases the reality women face all over the world: harassers are more often than not people that we know, people in the midst of our community, people we trust, who we like or even love. In most cases, it's not a complete stranger who will harass or molest us — multiple studies prove that those who get harassed almost always know their harassers. If we repeat this false stereotype, we obscure

the view of where and how sexual harassment is committed. **We are at the highest risk of sexual violence at home, at work, and around people we know.** Committed by our friend, relative, coworker, or because of that person's great reputation and (alleged) kindness.

Sexual harassment is not about what or who people are, but about what they do. If we want to identify sexual harassment effectively, it is crucial to actively and consciously separate identity from behaviour. We have to find out which environmental factors, power dynamics and actions are coming together and constitute abuse.

There are so many men who have harassed and assaulted women, but were “the guy who would never do such a thing”. All the nice guys, brilliant artists, sweet uncles — Woody Allen, Bill Cosby, the priest grabbing Ariana Grande⁹ are all people who have a lot of esteem, those who would be described with the words “they would never hurt a fly”, those who occupy a social position that allows them to act with impunity. What all those perpetrators have in common is that they have power. Power can come in different shapes.

So when we're told “beware of the men in the bushes”, we should actually beware of all the other ones, those who are truly dangerous.

The truth is: anyone can be a perpetrator of sexual harassment. And anyone can become a target.

“THIS IS WHAT A VICTIM LOOKS LIKE”

Harassment stories that we see in the media do not show the whole picture. They often favour a unique type of victimhood. They often make people at the margins invisible. Therefore, we have an unclear picture of who can become a target and how harassers take advantage of people. When society or the media show only one way of how to be a “victim”, who can be harassed and who cannot, all they do is prevent people from identifying harassment and bar them from seeking resources and support.

Your personal vulnerability is never the root cause of sexual harassment. We are not born vulnerable.

We are made vulnerable because of discrimination and unequal distribution of resources and power in society. Others can build on our social position or identity, use our vulnerable position against us. Harassers will use systemic racism, ableism, classism, sexism, LGBTI-phobia to their advantage. Why? Because they know that people affected by these oppressions are less likely to be listened to and taken seriously by society, especially when they speak up against sexual violence.

It can come from:

- Being new to an environment.
- Being unfamiliar with the rules that apply there.
- Needing a job badly (e.g. for financial reasons).
- Having a different class background than most people around you.
- Your cultural context.
- Your gender, gender identity, gender expression or sex characteristics.
- Your skin colour.
- Your age.
- Your level of social integration (friends, family, a social network that supports you).
- A physical disability.
- A mental health issue.
- A precarious economic situation.
- Your degrees.

In hostile environments, perpetrators can easily use these traits to exploit people. Harassers will most likely take advantage of vulnerable positions or even create them. Being aware of the factors that can expose you to harassment is an essential step in understanding how other people can try to exercise power over you, and specify your judgement of why what they did was wrong. Identifying them can be a great source of agency.

"SHE
ASKED
FOR IT"

What did you wear? What did you drink? Why were you even there? When speaking up about sexual harassment and assault, often the first question is about OUR behaviour. All of a sudden the perpetrator, their actions and motivations aren't in the picture anymore. The only one to blame is the target. We have internalised this logic in the form of self-blame. We ask ourselves if we were too tempting, if we initiated something, if we could have prevented all of it by saying no loudly and clearly enough. This is the classic perpetrator-victim reversal. People examine every detail about the affected ones to find a flaw, a mistake, a justification, while **the conversation should be about the ones who are actually responsible: perpetrators.** It is important to remember that it does not depend on our behaviour, we cannot make it "right". When we smile, some might interpret it as an invitation. When we don't, some see it as incentive to comment on how we should smile more.

It does not depend on how the ones who experience harassment behave. We have to look at sexual harassment and assault as "crimes of violence and control that stem from a person's determination to exercise power over another. Neither provocative dress nor promiscuous behaviours are invitations for unwanted sexual activity"¹⁰. "This "assumption of risk" wrongfully places the responsibility of the offender's action with the victim."

Whatever we wear, whatever we look like, it does not change a thing about whether or not a perpetrator will put their intention into action. In the end, it all comes down to this: the ones who get harassed are robbed of their humanity, dignity and integrity. They are humiliated, left feeling disgraced, hurt, traumatised, ashamed. The harasser, on the other hand, can walk away freely and pick up their daily routines as if nothing happened. Not so the ones experiencing assault, who have to carry the burden of handling and coping with it. Next time when your reflex of exculpating the harasser kicks in, remember this: you are the one who lives with the consequences, but so should they. They are responsible.

"THEY
DID NOT
MEAN IT"

All too often when we talk about harassment, people — including ourselves for that matter (#selfblame) — hurry to find an excuse for the culprit and a reason why they couldn't possibly have intended what they did. They take the intention of the act, and the ones affected are supposed to deal with the impact all by themselves.

Try and look at it this way: someone throws a frisbee in your face. A bystander observes the scene and tells you not to make a fuss about it because "they did not mean to hurt you". Why shouldn't we make the person who threw the frisbee accountable, instead of letting the one who got hit carry the additional load?

That sounds absurd, right?

Well, the same goes for harassment. Intention and impact can and should be separated. One may hurt someone else, regardless of whether they want to or not. Pointing out the intention and expecting that this will suffice is certainly not addressing the problem. You still have to deal with the pain. The one who threw the frisbee should do two things that should be self-evident: apologise and take responsibility for their actions. The people around should recognise your pain. Let's remember this: "it is NOT the victim's fault or responsibility to fix the situation; it is the abuser's choice."¹¹

What people tell us when they claim the perpetrator "did not mean it" is to shut up.

To not make a scene. To swallow it and deal with the harassment by ourselves, in silence. They tell us to forgive before we have even discerned for ourselves what just happened. They make it harder for the targets to step up and they forget the perpetrator. They tell us that the perpetrator's feelings are more important than our feelings, our dignity, our integrity, our right to feel okay, our well-being, our safety, our right to decide what we do with our minds and bodies. Again, the perpetrators not only get all the support of society, but they also get away with whatever they have done. That's not okay. The central focus is on the damage done and the pain inflicted upon us. As long as we keep upholding good intentions over impact, we cannot address harassment.

“SHE DID NOT
SAY NO /
SHE COULD/
SHOULD HAVE
STOPPED IT”

This myth is one of the classics of victim blaming. It assumes that a survivor could have stopped their harasser if only they had only said "no" loudly and clearly. This assumption is based on two factors:

1. It regards sexual harassment as something that a target can navigate. In reality, harassment and assault stem from the determination of a perpetrator. The targets are seldom in a position to navigate.
2. It ignores the basic principles of consent. The absence of a "no" is not a "yes". Consent requires a situation of free will and the possibility to say "no" without fearing repercussions. Consent is only possible when people are not in a situation of dependency. If people feel cornered and under pressure, it limits their ability to give affirmative consent. Consent can never be assumed. If somebody continues without checking if you want that thing, it is not your duty to speak up. The onus is on them to check up on you and if they do not, it is their fault for not asking.

If you want to read more about consent, check out our "change the world" section (page 43).

There is one prevalent picture of what somebody who is getting harassed looks like: helpless, without any agency or resources. **Harassers will tell you exactly this lie: that you are alone, you can't help yourself and no one can help you.** The truth is, you are not helpless and you have more agency than they want you to believe.

If you have never experienced sexual harassment, you might believe that you would have plenty of strategies and would know exactly what to do, and handle the situation like it was nothing. This occurs especially when your self-image is that of a strong, empowered, independent person who needs no help and can deal with any situation on their own. Often you do not see the invisible threads and factors that restrict you. On the contrary, when you are pushed into the situation, you are often made to believe that you are stuck and cannot do anything at all, also because of a great deal of internalised guilt that keeps you shut. When our self-image and self-performance is one of a badass, independent person, it can be even harder to acknowledge when we are feeling cornered, isolated and weakened and to realise that we need help.

Your actual agency is probably somewhere in between these extremes. It does have certain limits and it is hard to assume how you would behave in a situation that you have never been in, and if don't know what it feels like. Whether you feel cornered, helpless, or resilient, whether you identify as a victim, a survivor, or none of the two, you have options: there are solutions and ways to get out of it.

“SEXUAL HARASSMENT IS ABOUT SEX”

The first picture of harassment we have is often a hand on an arse. But it's much more complex than that. In reality, sexual harassment is often preceded by a long history of psychological harassment. Why? Because **sexual harassment is about POWER and not about sex**. Contrary to many representations, sexual harassment isn't always outright sexual.

Perpetrators use psychological harassment as a way to build power and control over their victim. It is common to hear stories of sexual harassment that have little in terms of sexual components, or where actual sexual behaviour (whether in the form of a comment or unwanted physical contact) only comes after a long build-up of psychological harassment.

The idea that sexual harassment is about sex comes from prevalent rape culture. Rape culture means that rape and sexual violence are normalised in a society. On the one end of the spectrum might be a sexual joke or the idea that women are objects, on the other end is sexual violence and rape. Rape culture takes women's humanity away and insinuates that it is normal that their bodies are there to be taken and consumed.

“WE DON’T
HAVE
HARASSMENT/
HARASSERS
HERE”

Let’s be clear about this: sexual harassment can happen ANYWHERE. In any place, any environment, any location, any circumstance, at any time. Contrary to popular belief, harassment does not only happen in a dark street with no one around, but often in bright daylight and with plenty of bystanders around.

When we are told that sexual harassment does not or cannot happen in a specific environment, that it couldn’t happen in environments where people are well-educated and wealthy (see the ubiquitous harassment and assault at university campuses¹²) or “working for the greater good” (see the many harassment stories in the European Parliament¹³), there is reason to worry, because this means there is a culture of denial that excuses potential perpetrators. **When people say that it doesn’t exist, it becomes more difficult for the people affected to compete against this claim.** This kind of culture makes it easier for perpetrators, because the environment supports them and can rely on getting away with it, without fear of repercussions.

In fact, there are some environmental factors that create a good breeding ground for sexual harassment. Keep your eyes open - abusive behaviour is more likely to flourish when the following environmental factors exist:

- Unchecked power — those in power can act as they please as there are no checks and balances.
- Strong hierarchies in place.
- High levels of dependency.
- High economic and personal stakes, fear of retaliation, possible repercussions if speaking up, creating a culture of silence.

A responsible environment shouldn’t just claim that they don’t have harassers among their ranks (thereby silencing those who do address the problem), but tackle the environmental factors that foster harassment.

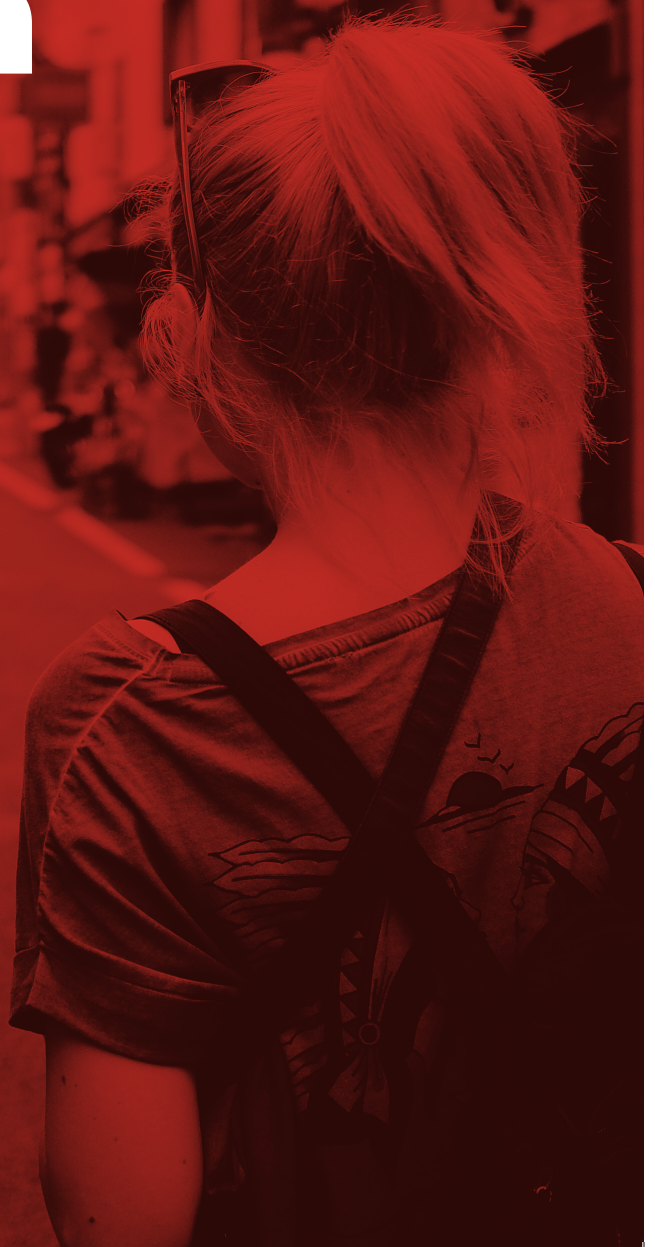
**“IF IT
REALLY WAS
HARASSMENT,
SOMEONE
WOULD SAY
SOMETHING”
(AKA THE
BYSTANDER
EFFECT)**

This popular argument turns the problem around again to the target's disadvantage. Those experiencing harassment do not only have to provide proof for the incident; if the environment does not react — as is unfortunately often the case — then no harassment can have occurred. Because you would notice that, wouldn't you? **The problem is that harassment is usually noticed by bystanders, but very few of them intervene.** Often this is because they don't want to see it, because they have adopted the logic of the perpetrator (that's just the way he is), because they're caught in the same hierarchical power structure, because it is difficult to see a nice colleague as the perpetrator. That's why people often turn away and leave the victim alone. Silence is often a symptom of the so-called “bystander effect”: if nobody openly addresses the transgression, everybody else looks the other way, too. However, as soon as one person speaks up, it is much more likely that other people will engage as they have probably noticed it all along. There are possibilities to change this culture of silence. You can read more about this in the third part “change the world” (page 52). Everything can change when you have an ally you can trust and open up to.

**FROM MYTHS
TO EMPOWERMENT**

- Sexual harassment happens when people feed the myth of the grey zone, where everything can be a misunderstanding.
- Anyone can be a perpetrator, but there are environments that allow perpetrators to exert their power freely.
- Anyone can be a target, once they are put in a vulnerable position.
- Harassment is an act against your will and is never your fault.
- Sexual harassment is not about sex and passion, but about power and control.

Conclu- sion



Hey! So you made it through this guide. We know this is a lot to digest and you probably have many different feelings about this. Maybe you feel empowered, overwhelmed, sad, angry? Maybe you feel like the world out there is just waiting to get at you? Here are a few concluding thoughts to help you process all this.

Your feelings are valuable

No matter what people say. What you feel, and the knowledge you have about yourself is the most valuable. Nobody is allowed to take that away from you. When you feel hurt, that is real and valid. End of story.

You are not alone

That's one of the most important messages we wanted to share with you. We wrote this guide because we had analysed the experiences of harassment of hundreds of women* and had noticed that there's always a pattern. Sexual harassment is systematic. Yes, your personal alert system is unique; it is how you navigate the world using your personal space as a guideline. But it's also something collective that women* all over the world experience together. Realising that we are in this together makes us stronger and more connected.

Change is a collection of small steps

By reading this guide and acknowledging that sexual harassment is unacceptable, you are already creating change. Change isn't necessarily visible on the outside and it doesn't mean you have to get out there and knock something over. Change can start with you understanding that somebody crossing your boundaries wasn't right, that you shouldn't be the one who feels guilty about it. Let's watch out for when our sisters are feeling the same way, and take care of each other. Let's keep our eyes open and have the same compassion for ourselves that we have others.

WE ARE IN THIS TOGETHER.

When we say change the world, we do not necessarily mean you should go out there and address the whole issue by yourself. This guide could be just a stepping stone to a bigger change.

So what can you do now? The possibilities are endless:

CREATE CHANGE FOR YOURSELF

- Practice your alert system.
- Try and respect your boundaries every day.
- Be compassionate with yourself as you would be with the people in the stories.

CONNECT WITH OTHERS

- Realise that you have a lot in common with your sisters
- Have others' back
- Spread the knowledge.
- Keep your eyes open for patterns.
- Print and distribute this guide.
- Send us your stories to make this guide denser, richer and more intersectional.

CHANGE THE SYSTEM

- Be an active ambassador every day, in your private and professional life, everywhere.
- Practice counter-speech.
- Share your strategies against harassment with others, give workshops.
- Oppose the myths on sexual harassment wherever you encounter them.
- When you see something, say something.
- Start a collective against harassment.

SHARE YOUR STORY

This guide is just the beginning of an ongoing online project. We want to hear more stories so we can incorporate their insights in this guide. Interested in contributing? Visit **periodbrussels.eu**.

End notes

- 1 "Issues and Information about Sexual Harassment", Marshall University Women's Center
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- 2 "Why victims freeze during sexual assault or harassment", Kimberly Gillan, SBS, 2018
<https://www.sbs.com.au/topics/life/culture/article/2018/02/27/why-victims-freeze-during-sexual-assault-or-harrassment>
- 3 Tea Consent ©2015 Emmeline May and Blue Seat Studios
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- 4 "The missing stair", Cliff Pervocracy, 2012
<http://pervocracy.blogspot.com/2012/06/missing-stair.html>
- 5 "Sexual harassment trainings do not work. But some things do", Claire Cain Miller, New York Times, 2017
<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/11/upshot/sexualharassment-workplace-prevention-effective.html>
- 6 "Bystander Intervention Tips and Strategies", National Sexual Violence Resource Center
https://www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/2018-02/publications_nsvrc_tip-sheet_bystander-intervention-tips-and-strategies_1.pdf
- 7 "'Here's how to help if you witness sexual harassment at work'", Meera Jaganathan, MarketWatch, 2017
<https://www.marketwatch.com/story/heres-how-to-help-if-you-witness-sexual-harassment-at-work-2017-12-01-10884211>
- 8 For examples of what a safe, ethical and respectful interview can and should look like (and standards you can demand to have respected during interviews), take a look at the "Dart Center's Guide on Interviewing Survivors of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence"
<https://dartcenter.org/content/conducting-interviews-with-survivors-sexual-and-gender-based-violence-by-witness>
- 9 "Nothing maintains women's silence like the fear of making a scene", Clementine Ford, The Sydney Morning Herald, 2018
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- 10 "Common Myths Associated with Sexual Violence", Florida Institute of Technology
<https://www.fit.edu/title-ix/sexual-harassmentviolence/>
- 11 "Rape culture, victim blaming and the facts", Southern Connecticut State University
<http://www.southernct.edu/sexual-misconduct/facts.html>
- 12 The documentary "The Hunting Ground" documents how prevalent rape culture in US universities and how sexual violence is both common and invisibilised.
The HuntingGround, Kirby Dick, 2015,
<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4185572/>
- 13 #metooEP, a blog created by staff of the European Parliament, collects testimonies of sexual harassment in the European institutions
<https://metooep.com>

