

# JUST BELOW THE SURFACE

A Fawcett Society briefing  
on sexism at work

# Just below the surface

**Sexism: it's nearly 40 years since it was officially outlawed in the workplace. Therefore on the surface everything appears fine. Women and girls are excelling at school and university and are entering the workplace in numbers equal to men. It is now illegal to pay a woman less than a man, dismiss her when she becomes pregnant, or turn her down for promotion on the basis she is female.**

**But look below the surface, and today's reality is very different. Sexism lurks in some of the most common situations and scenarios in UK workplaces. Yet far too often it fails to be detected, identified or challenged.**

## Sexism is just below the surface...

### ...in the office

**Women face a high risk of pregnancy discrimination and are often subject to a degrading 'sex object' culture at work.**

**A high incidence of sexual harassment has been unearthed in studies of European countries, including the UK. Exposure to harassment can be between 70% and 90%.<sup>1</sup>**

**16% of men who have access to the internet have viewed pornography at work, and 15% of men have emailed sexual images to colleagues.<sup>2</sup>**

**30,000 women lose their jobs every year just for being pregnant.<sup>3</sup>**

*"I was one of only a handful of women working on the trading floor. Young female employees were told to 'turn clients on' and encouraged to dress sexily around clients. Colleague would describe us over the phone to clients, saying we were scantily clad and making up what we were wearing – 'low cut tops and mini-skirts', etc. It was humiliating. Guys looking at pornography on each others computers was pretty common, sometimes very explicit stuff. Some of the guys thought it was really funny to look up our skirts or to touch us. It was very difficult to deal with."*  
**Ellen, City worker**

### ...during interviews

**Discrimination by employers on the basis that a woman is or may become pregnant is endemic. Due to pervasive gender stereotypes women can also find themselves straight-jacketed by prejudice about their skills and behaviour. This can undermine their chances of promotion and advancement in their profession.**

**52% of employers take into account the chances of a new member of staff becoming pregnant before employing them.<sup>4</sup>**

**Women who negotiate for a higher salary at interview are more likely than men to be penalized for it and are perceived by interviewers to be 'less nice' than women who don't negotiate.<sup>5</sup>**

**The performance of women leaders is often judged according to stereotypical expectations, not their actual performance. Studies have failed to demonstrate significant actual differences in leadership styles between women and men. Yet people commonly perceive that women underperform on crucial leadership traits because these traits are judged to be 'masculine'.<sup>6</sup>**

*"A more senior position in my firm became available so I approached my manager to ask if I could be considered for it. He told me there was no point in me applying because I was female. He went on to say that women have to work much harder to get such a job. I was shocked and disappointed, and felt de-valued."*  
**Ruth, former City worker**

## ...when entertaining clients

The use of lapdancing clubs has become increasingly commonplace in corporate entertaining. This can create an intimidating and degrading work environment, and the majority of women would feel uncomfortable working for a company that allowed this.<sup>7</sup>

There are now at least 300 lap dancing clubs in the UK. They are increasingly targeting the corporate sector through tailored marketing.

*"Thousand of pounds were spent by male colleagues entertaining clients in lap dancing clubs. They would discuss the strippers back at the desk and how they had paid them to provide "extra services". It was very uncomfortable to hear these discussions between the men I had to work with."*

Alison, City worker

## ...at the end of the day

Women still do the bulk of caring and housework in the UK. Yet there is a 'long working hours' culture in British workplaces, where performance is judged according to hours put in rather than the quality of work produced. This culture, combined with a lack of flexible working options, means women with caring responsibilities simply can't compete on an equal footing with men.

*"I have found it difficult to convince the partners that I am committed to my job and worthy of promotion while I am working part-time. There is very much a long hours culture and this is difficult to manage with a young family. Whilst the firm supports part-time working you have to go the extra mile to prove that you are as committed as when you worked full time."*

Jenny, Solicitor

UK full-time employees work the longest hours in the European Union.<sup>8</sup>

Approximately 1 in 5 employees works unpaid overtime.<sup>9</sup>

Nearly 1/3 of parents with a dependant child have left or been unable to take up a job because of their caring responsibilities.<sup>10</sup>

## ...on pay day

Women are paid less than men in every sector and in all professions. This is a result of plain old-fashioned discrimination, the undervaluation of traditional 'women's work', and a lack of flexible working options.

Women working full-time earn on average 17% less than men.<sup>11</sup>

Women working part-time earn on average 36% less than men working full-time

Two out of three low paid workers are women.<sup>12</sup>

*"I was performing extremely well in my firm and as a result took on the functions of a Director. However, I was told I had to 'prove myself' before the directorship was formalised and a pay rise given. There was no justifiable reason for this; I had outperformed all colleagues in my department. Shortly afterwards another Director was appointed (formally) on over double my salary without a requirement to 'prove himself'. To this day I am paid substantially less than all male Directors at my firm."*

Emma, City worker

# How do we flush out sexism?

## FAWCETT'S CAMPAIGN

Sexism at work is not an inevitable part of working life. Fawcett's 'Just below the surface' campaign aims to expose the reality of sexism at work so that women and men can start to name it and challenge it. But we need your help!

Take action today and help raise awareness of what is just below the surface!

- Send a 'Just below the surface' e-postcard to a friend or colleague
- Download a 'Just below the surface' poster from the Fawcett website and display it in a public place
- Order some 'Just below the surface' postcards and send them to family and friends
- Speak out about your experiences of sexism at work on Fawcett's website
- Get involved in Fawcett's campaigns on equal pay and reforming lapdance club licensing by visiting [www.fawcettsociety.org.uk](http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk)

## Action Government needs to take to flush out sexism

- Make pay audits compulsory to ensure women and men are paid equally for work of equal value
- Extend the right to work flexibly to all, not just parents
- License lap dancing clubs as Sex Encounter Establishments

## Action businesses need to take to flush out sexism

- Conduct annual pay audits
- Mainstream flexible working and curb the long hours working culture
- Don't use or fund the sex industry

Visit [www.fawcettsociety.org.uk](http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk) to download campaign materials, send an e-postcard, share your experiences and join the Fawcett Society.

Sexism has no place in UK business in the 21st century. The time for action is now.

The Fawcett Society is the UK's leading campaign for gender equality. When individual women are able to realise their potential, the benefits will be felt across society. The Fawcett Society makes a difference by campaigning for legislative change, influencing practice, and empowering women and men to effect change at a grassroots level.

**Economic rights:** women's right to fair pay and fair treatment in the workplace

**Political rights:** women's right to a powerful voice in decision making

**Social rights:** women and men to break free from stereotypes

**Bodily rights:** women's freedom from violence, harassment and objectification

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**Fawcett**  
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wo since 1866 men

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