



Think Business, Think Equality

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# INTRODUCTION

This guidance is for small and medium businesses who want to improve gender equality and diversity in their workplace. You can use it alongside our other *Think Business, Think Equality* resources to make a positive change in your business.

Delivering workplace equality makes good business sense. Having fairer working practices allows you to attract and retain the best talent, reduce recruitment and training costs, and makes your business more productive, more innovative, and more profitable.

This resource provides information and advice on workplace culture: what it is and how it affects your business, how to understand your workplace culture, and what steps you can take ensure your business is an inclusive place for all employees.

The *Think Business, Think Equality* resources are designed to be used together to enable you to create change in your business. The action you take in each area will reinforce actions in the others.

**The Think Business, Think Equality online tool is available at:**

[www.thinkbusinessthinkequality.org.uk](http://www.thinkbusinessthinkequality.org.uk)

## LEGAL DISCLAIMER

While every effort has been made to ensure that the explanations given here are accurate, only the courts or tribunals can give authoritative interpretations of the law.



# KEY MESSAGES

These key messages are where you should begin. You can use them as a starting point to think about what you need to do to create an inclusive workplace culture in your business.

## 1. Workplace culture shapes staff experiences.

It's made up of the values, behaviours, processes and attitudes that influence how people work together and feel at work.

## 2. A culture that excludes women holds them back.

Women may be passed over for promotion, denied development opportunities, or experience sexual harassment in cultures that aren't inclusive.

## 3. Male-dominated cultures can create conditions where sexism and sexual harassment thrive.

They increase the risk of sexual harassment and sexist behaviours, and employers have a legal duty to prevent and respond to this.

## 4. Everyday decisions are shaped by culture.

Who gets promoted, who leads on high-profile work, and the size of pay rises can all be influenced by gendered assumptions and biases.

## 5. Women's specific health needs shouldn't be overlooked.

When issues like menopause or menstrual health are minimised, it sends a message that women's wellbeing doesn't matter.



**6. Policies must be up to date and fair.**

Review them regularly to make sure they reflect the law, best practice, and don't unintentionally disadvantage women.

**7. Good practice needs more than good policies.**

Managers and others responsible for applying policies need training and support to put them into practice fairly.

**8. Challenge bias in decision-making.**

Provide training to help decision-makers understand how biases, stereotypes and assumptions can influence outcomes, and how to avoid this.

**9. Staff should know their rights and feel safe to speak up.**

Creating an open, respectful culture where people can raise concerns helps prevent problems from escalating.

**10. Leadership sets the tone.**

Leaders should regularly communicate the business's commitment to an inclusive culture and update staff on what's being done to make it a reality.



# WHAT IS WORKPLACE CULTURE?

Workplace culture can be difficult to define, though is generally considered to be a combination of the processes, attitudes, values and behaviours that exist within a workplace that shape and impact upon the company and its staff. The culture might be largely determined by expectations of management, or may have evolved over many years among staff, and is often accepted without question.

These processes, attitudes, values and behaviours both shape and are shaped by workplace culture, creating a feedback loop. You can find examples of this throughout this guidance.

This feedback effect shows that you need to examine the policies, processes, attitudes and behaviours in your business in order to understand your workplace culture, and ensure your business is an inclusive place for all employees.

## WORKPLACE CULTURE AND INEQUALITY

While there may never be any intention to exclude particular groups or individuals, cultural norms at work can result in some people being put at a disadvantage. This can include, for example, companies where there is an expectation, whether implicit or explicit, to work very long hours, where women would struggle to balance the demands of their job with those of childcare, leading to these women being seen as less committed to the business.



It's hard to 'see' workplace culture in your own business because you work in it every day and it just becomes the norm. However, its impacts are clear. Workplace cultures that don't feel inclusive to female staff can manifest in women being passed over for promotion, having less access to training and development opportunities, and being more likely to be working in a role that is below their skill level because of inflexible working practices.

## POWER IMBALANCE

Gender inequality means that women still have less power and status than men in the workplace. This is due to a wide range of factors, including:

- gender norms and stereotypes that steer women and men into very different roles in work and society;
- jobs typically done by women being undervalued and lower paid, for example care work;
- women's greater responsibility for childcare and care for older, unwell, and disabled people; and
- a lack of flexible working, especially in senior jobs.

This power imbalance is even more acute for women who are racially minoritised, disabled, younger or older, or mothers. This creates a culture in which microaggressions are dismissed or minimised, in which women are told 'it wasn't meant that way', and in which they aren't believed when they do make a complaint. It's also why harassers are rarely held accountable, and discrimination goes unaddressed.



## MICROAGGRESSIONS

Microaggressions are the brief and everyday verbal and non-verbal behaviours, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative prejudices. These can reflect racist, sexist, or other prejudices, such as Islamophobia or homophobia. Whilst they are referred to as 'micro' that does not diminish the significant negative effect they can have on an employee's life and experience at work.

## EVERYDAY SEXISM

Sexist workplace cultures enable sexism to go unchallenged, and undermine women in the workplace in more or less subtle ways. Everyday sexism is visible in formal and informal interactions, and manifests in a number of ways in the workplace, for example:

- Women's contributions being valued less; for example, their ideas being dismissed in meetings, or their contributions being initially ignored, only to be repeated by a male colleague later and received positively.
- Women being assigned to fewer higher visibility projects despite having equivalent skills and experience to their male colleagues.
- Women being expected or asked to make the tea or take minutes, irrespective of their role.
- Sexist jokes and remarks dismissed as 'banter', including a preoccupation with a woman's physical appearance, including her clothes.



- The use of language which diminishes, infantilises or sexualises women, e.g. referring to colleagues as ‘the girls’, or calling a colleague ‘darling’ or ‘love’, which creates an environment where women feel they are seen as less valuable or held in contempt.
- Biased or stereotypical expectations around the type of work or the position a woman, or man, would hold; for example, assuming a woman is a lower grade when she is a senior manager, or a man being assumed to be the manager of a team by a visitor from another department.
- Suggesting a female colleague only got a promotion because the hiring manager found her attractive or implying she had slept with him.
- Referring to a female manager as ‘bossy’ while male managers are seen as assertive and strong.
- The, often unspoken, assumption that women will organise collection sheets, gifts, and nights out for colleagues.

Everyday sexism disempowers women and makes it hard for them to feel like they can come forward. It creates a conducive environment for sexual harassment and makes it difficult for women to feel like anything will change.

## SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Sexual harassment isn’t just an issue between two people. It’s also a wider problem related to gender inequality and sexism in the workplace, and the imbalance of power between men and women in society. Levels of sexual harassment tend to be higher in male-dominated workplaces, and in workplaces where women are less likely to be in leadership roles. This is because in male-oriented workplace cultures, gender norms and biases are particularly acute.



It's easy to think that sexual harassment doesn't happen in your business. You may never have had an employee report sexual harassment to you. However, an absence of reports doesn't mean sexual harassment isn't happening. Sexual harassment is often under-reported, as women feel they won't be believed, that it will be treated as 'just banter', or that they will suffer negative consequences if they report. A survey found that 79% of victim-survivors did not report unwanted sexual behaviour to their employer.

## The workplace culture feedback loop

### EXAMPLE: SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Samira is being sexually harassed by a male colleague, Andrew, who keeps making sexualised comments about her in earshot of both her and other colleagues. In her next one-to-one she raises this with her line manager, Joshua, who says that he's sure Andrew was just joking and didn't mean to upset her.



**The cause:** Views held by people that sexualised comments are 'just banter', and aren't serious enough to warrant action.



**Impact:** Samira's trust in her line manager is damaged.



**Impact:** Andrew continues to make sexualised comments about Samira, and begins doing so with another woman in the team, Jennifer.



**Impact:** Jennifer talks to Samira who tells her that her line manager did nothing when she mentioned the sexualised comments. Jennifer decides not to report.



**Impact:** Other colleagues in the team regularly hear Andrew making sexualised comments. This sends a message to both men and women in the team that these comments are normal and not a concern.



**Impact:** Another man in the team joins in with Andrew in making sexualised comments about other female colleagues.



**Impact:** Women continue to be sexually harassed in the workplace, and don't report it to their line manager as they think "what's the point, this is just the culture here".

When sexual harassment and sexist behaviours go unchallenged women feel that they aren't valued or respected. This is extremely detrimental to their wellbeing and to your business, by impacting staff morale and productivity and your reputation. You also run the risk of a costly tribunal claim if you can't show that you've taken steps to prevent sexual harassment in your business.

To find out more on how you can tackle and prevent workplace sexual harassment, [read our resources](#).



## INTERSECTING INEQUALITIES

Different groups of women experience multiple, intersecting inequalities and discriminations that overlap and combine to create different levels of inequality.

For example, sexism, racism and Islamophobia together shape racially-minoritised Muslim women's experiences of inequality and discrimination. Racism causes the deeply rooted prejudices and discriminations that racially minoritised people experience in their lives, which contributes to their inequality at work. For women, these inequalities overlap to create an ever-larger set of barriers that see them facing racist and sexist attitudes and behaviours, and employment policies and practice that sustain their inequality at work and in wider society.

## DECISION MAKING

How decisions are made in your business both shapes and is shaped by workplace culture. Biased attitudes about men and women still influence decisions on the size of a pay rise or bonus, who gets promoted, who gets access to the best training, and who gets to lead on high-profile projects. The phenomenon known as affinity bias means that people are more likely to favour other people who they see as 'like them', which leads to benefits and opportunities going to those who are favoured, rather than being awarded fairly.

This may be intentional or unintentional – but whichever it is, if it impacts on decisions, it's a problem for your workplace culture. Where decisions on recruitment, development, or promotion aren't objective it also means you can't be sure you've got the right people in the right roles in your business. When pay decisions are subject to discretion, bias can creep in and put your business at risk of an equal claim.



You can find more detailed information on bias and inequality in pay and reward, in recruitment and promotion, and training and development [here](#).

## The workplace culture feedback loop

### EXAMPLE: WHO GETS PROMOTED?

**The problem:** A business looks at its promotions over the past five years, and notices that 80% of them went to men.



**The cause:** Biases and stereotypical views held by decision makers, who believe that women are less interested in promotion and men are more suited to leadership.



**Impact:** More senior roles are held by men, giving male employees more power and a greater influence in decision making.



**Impact:** Female employees see that senior posts are largely filled by men, which sends a message that they're unlikely to get promoted due to bias.



**Impact:** Fewer women apply for promotion, which results in decision makers assuming that women are less interested in promotion.



**Impact:** Decision makers assume that men are more suited to these roles, as they are exposed to fewer examples of women demonstrating leadership.



**Impact:** Men continue to have greater access to promoted posts.

## FLEXIBLE WORKING

Bias can also creep into decisions on access to flexible work, which means a woman in one team may be able to work flexibly in a way that suits her, whereas a woman in another team may have a similar request refused. This can be driven by negative attitudes towards flexible working, or line managers who are hesitant because they aren't confident on how to manage flexible working in their teams.

Covid-19 played a key role in accelerating flexible working, with more employers offering it to their staff. Homeworking and hybrid working are now more common, and many employers offer flexible working in one form or another. However, in some businesses it's less common to see flexible working in front line jobs and in the most senior roles, and part-time work in particular is very difficult to find at senior levels, as it's often seen as less suitable for these roles.

This creates barriers that impact women's ability to combine their caring roles with paid work, and can foster a culture that disadvantages parents and carers, who are more likely to be women. If flexible working isn't accessible in senior roles this means women may be less likely to apply for



promotion, and more likely to be working in a role where they can work flexibly but for which they are over-skilled. This means you're missing out on women's skills and talents in your business.

## INFORMAL NETWORKS

Unequal access to opportunity has a negative impact on workplace culture. Many development and promotion opportunities are accessed through informal networks, which women have less access to, particularly those that are based on after-work socialising. These informal networks are frequently where promotion or development opportunities are discussed, and this can result in these opportunities going to the same groups of people. Informal discussion of such opportunities can also mean jobs are not formally advertised, or the recruitment process is not followed as the successful candidate has already been 'shoulder-tapped'.

It's not uncommon for businesses to have particular internal candidates in mind when advertising promoted posts. There's nothing wrong with recognising your internal talent. However, where it appears that staff have been 'shoulder tapped' for promotion, or the formal process hasn't been followed, it can create a perception of unfairness and have an impact on morale and workplace culture. It also means you can't be certain you're getting the best person for the role.

## PRESENTEEISM AND PROXIMITY BIAS

Presenteeism and proximity bias reinforce gender inequality by favouring employees who are physically present in the workplace, often to the disadvantage of women, particularly those with caring roles.



Presenteeism – the expectation to work long hours or be constantly available – disadvantages women who have to balance work with caring, limiting their career progression and leadership opportunities. Proximity bias leads to greater visibility and opportunities for in-office and on-site workers, sidelining those who work from home or flexibly, who are more likely to be women. Together, these biases contribute to slower career advancement, lower pay, and reduced access to key networks for women, exacerbating the gender pay gap.

There is overwhelming evidence that a long hours culture, or ‘presenteeism’ can be harmful to both staff and productivity. Many women perceive that promoted posts will require a significant increase in hours spent at the office, which can be challenging for staff with caring responsibilities and acts as a disincentive.

The issue of presenteeism is also relevant to hybrid working. Despite evidence showing that hybrid working has a positive impact on productivity, many businesses have started to require employees to come into the office more often, or stopped hybrid working altogether. This is driven by a managerial culture where staff aren’t trusted to work autonomously, and home workers are seen as less committed.

Requiring staff to come into the office when there is no clear business need to do so sees employees disengage, meaning productivity drops and staff are more likely to leave. It disadvantages staff who use hybrid working to successfully balance earning with caring – staff who are more likely to be women. Homeworking and hybrid working are also important for disabled women as they can help them better manage their condition or impairment, therefore presenteeism can be particularly detrimental to this group.



## THE MOTHERHOOD PENALTY

Too many workplaces still have cultures that are unsupportive of women who are pregnant or on maternity leave. Many women report a lack of support from their employer during pregnancy, and challenges in returning to work.

This is driven by biased attitudes and assumptions about mothers' commitment to their roles and careers, and their desire to develop and progress. Evidence shows that fathers are not treated in the same way: while women experience a 'motherhood penalty', fathers often experience a 'fatherhood bonus' on becoming a parent, where they are viewed as more responsible, committed, and deserving of higher pay or promotions after becoming a parent, where they are viewed as more responsible, committed, and deserving of higher pay or promotions after becoming a parent.

The expectation that women should be the primary caregivers will only change if men take on a more equal share of childcare. To support this, employers must normalise part-time and flexible working for all employees, not just mothers, and encourage fathers to take shared parental leave.

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## WOMEN'S HEALTH AND SAFETY AT WORK

Women's specific health needs are often minimised or overlooked in the workplace, which sends a message to women that they aren't valued, or that their wellbeing isn't taken seriously.



## Menopause

Menstruation and menopause are both normal and natural parts of women's lives, but there is still widespread discomfort around talking about them in the workplace, particularly for menopause. Many women don't feel comfortable talking about menopause because of ongoing stigma and stereotypes of 'menopausal women'. When managers and colleagues avoid the subject, and senior leaders don't see it as a workplace issue, it makes it even harder for women to get the support they need.

## Risk assessments

Men and women face different risks due to physical, physiological, and employment differences. Historically, safety regulations have focused on the risks found in male-dominated sector where there may be higher levels of injury from one-off events, and have often ignored the health risks in female-dominated jobs, such as work-related stress, or repetitive strain injuries. This means employers often overlook the risks faced by women, leaving women without support.

## PPE

Women who need to wear personal protective equipment (PPE) for their jobs often report being issued with ill-fitting equipment and uniforms that have been designed for men. This puts women at risk of accident and injury. Employers have a legal duty to ensure that female employees are provided with equipment and uniforms that are fit for purpose, taking into account different body shape and size from their male counterparts.



## Inadequate facilities

Inadequate facilities for women, such as a lack of toilets, changing rooms, or bins for period products, create barriers to women's full participation in the workplace. In male-dominated industries, the absence of proper facilities can make workplaces unwelcoming or even inaccessible for women, discouraging recruitment, retention, and career progression. It also signals a lack of consideration for women's basic needs, reinforcing the idea that they are not fully valued in certain roles or sectors.



# HOW TO GET WORKPLACE CULTURE RIGHT

Workplace culture has a significant impact on your business, affecting staff morale, productivity and loyalty. A positive workplace culture can reduce costs associated with staff turnover, make recruitment and development more efficient and effective, and boost your bottom line.

It's hard to 'see' workplace culture in your own business because you work in it every day and it just becomes the norm. This is why it's essential to take a step back for an objective view of the culture in your business. You need to be willing to be challenged and to honestly confront any issues you identify. Improving workplace culture is a critical part of creating a safe and positive environment for your staff, and ensuring your business is well-placed for success.

**This section sets out what you need to do to get it right.**

## WORKPLACE POLICIES

Many smaller businesses don't have an employee handbook or written HR policies in place. When a problem occurs, they may find themselves in a worrying situation, trying to work out what to do for the best. Employment tribunals will automatically mark down any employer which has not demonstrated a willingness to provide a fair working environment.

You should ensure you have policies in place on:

- Recruitment and promotion
- Development and progression
- Pay and bonus allocation



- Equal pay
- Flexible working
- Equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI)
- Sexual harassment
- Bullying and harassment/dignity at work
- Health and safety

There is also a legal requirement for your business to have a Health and Safety policy if you employ five or more people. For businesses with fewer than five employees, a written health and safety policy is not a legal requirement, but employers are still obligated to ensure the health, safety, and welfare of their staff under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974.

## EQUALITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION POLICIES

An equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) policy should include statements on the value your business places on equality, diversity and inclusion, and how these will be put into practice.

Here are some examples of what to include:

- What behaviour you expect of your staff
- What kind of behaviour is unacceptable
- What staff can expect of you as an employer



You should regularly review all policies to ensure they remain consistent with the law and best practice, and don't have a differential impact on women and men that can lead to discrimination or inequality. [For more information on how to review your policies in this way, get in touch with us.](#)

## ENSURING POLICY AND PRACTICE ARE CONSISTENT

Managers are important gatekeepers when it comes to how workplace policies are implemented. A good policy on its own isn't enough to ensure good practice: line managers need to understand your policies and their role in implementing them.

You should provide training and support to key people with responsibility for implementing your workplace policies. For example:

- Training for hiring managers on your recruitment policy.
- Training for line managers on managing flexible working.
- Training for line managers on dealing with reports of sexual harassment.

You can find more detailed guidance on recruitment and promotion, flexible working, and sexual harassment in our [Downloads](#).



## PUTTING POLICY INTO PRACTICE

Your business may have a policy setting out a commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion, but culture change can only be created through tangible and consistent action.

All staff should receive training on equality, diversity and inclusion so that they understand their rights and responsibilities, and how equality law affects them and their colleagues. This training should be delivered by experts and include information on equality law, discrimination, what measures you are taking, and what behaviours you expect from staff. It must also include capacity building on understanding racism, sexism, and disability discrimination, and the inequalities experienced by other protected groups, specifically.

High quality training won't create change on its own. It should be a part of a wider action plan on advancing equality and diversity in your business.



## DECISION MAKING

Taking a fair, systematic and consistent approach helps ensure decision makers do not discriminate unfairly, whether consciously or subconsciously.

You should offer training for key people on how discrimination, biases, and stereotypes can affect decision making, and understand how to ensure they treat all staff fairly. For example:

- Staff involved in recruitment decisions should be clear on how a successful applicant should be considered and selected.
- Managers who make decisions on pay should understand your equal pay policy and how bias can affect perceptions of women and men in pay negotiations.
- Managers who decide who to allocate to lead high profile projects should understand how affinity bias can influence who gets chosen.

You can find more detailed guidance on recruitment and promotion, development and progression, and pay and reward in our [Downloads](#).



## FLEXIBLE WORKING

Having a flexible working policy in place and support for line managers are key actions, but there are other steps you can take to make flexible working more accessible in your business.

Senior leaders are key to encouraging flexible working and fostering a culture where it can thrive. Leaders can do this by making a statement to staff about the use of flexible working and its benefits, or how they work flexibly. When leaders work flexibly or part-time themselves this sends a strong message that flexible working is welcome and valued in your business.

No job should be automatically ruled out for flexible working and your policy should make this clear. Trialling a new flexible working pattern is an easy way of finding out what works well for staff, for teams, and for the organisation.

You can find out more about making flexible working work for your business in our [Downloads](#).

## KEEPING RECORDS

Many businesses keep records on a range of employment practices. Record keeping is essential to ensure your procedures are able to withstand scrutiny.

You should keep all documents connected with recruitment and selection processes, such as shortlisting records, interviewers' notes, or any other record of decision making.

Records should also be kept of decisions on pay and bonus, requests for training, and flexible working.



## USING DATA TO UNDERSTAND EQUALITY IN YOUR WORKPLACE

It's good practice to collect gender-disaggregated data. This is when information is collected and broken down by gender, to aid comparison between men and women. This can be helpful in determining where women and men might be differentially impacted by your policies and practices.

Data, broken down by gender, should be gathered on the following:

- Job applicants.
- Applicants shortlisted.
- Successful applicants.
- Pay and reward decisions.
- Staff accessing training and development.
- Performance management.
- Requests for flexible working, including the decision made.
- Sickness and absence.
- Staff taking shared parental leave.
- Grievances.
- Disciplinary.
- Staff leaving the organisation.



Depending on your business size and tenure, it may take time to develop the systems and processes you need to gather data in these areas. Wherever you're starting from, you should aim to improve your data gathering over time, working towards collecting and analysing data in an intersectional way. This means being able to examine multiple characteristics simultaneously, such as gender and age, to identify trends, such as whether women are more likely than men to leave at a particular age.

## DATA PROTECTION

You must ensure that employee data is collected, processed, and stored in compliance with UK data protection requirements by:

- Only collecting necessary data and ensuring staff know how their data will be used.
- Storing data securely, restricting access to authorised personnel only, and implementing appropriate technical safeguards.
- Deleting or anonymising data when no longer needed, in line with the company's retention policy.
- Providing employees with their data rights, including access, correction, and deletion requests.



## EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION WITH STAFF

Workplace situations often escalate to an employment tribunal because of a lack of, or ineffective, communication.

You should give staff information about their rights and encourage them to speak to line managers if they have a problem at work. Encouraging a culture of openness will ensure that staff are confident that issues will be taken seriously.

### KEEPING IN TOUCH WITH STAFF ON MATERNITY OR PARENTAL LEAVE

The law says you must let staff know about any promotion opportunities or other information relating to their job that they would normally be made aware of if they were working. This is particularly important for staff who are on maternity, or other parental, leave, who may have a claim for pregnancy and maternity discrimination if they are not kept up to date.

Involving staff when changes are made to the business can help to foster a culture of openness. How you involve staff will depend on the type, size, and structure of your business. This might be done through staff meetings and surveys, or through a trade union rep.

One-to-one meetings with line managers can also be a forum for discussion. Where line managers discuss an individual staff member's progress, ensure they take a consistent approach.



Discrimination and unfair treatment often have at their root a failure to deal with situations consistently.

Effective communication also applies to how staff are made aware of promotion and development opportunities. You should ensure that staff know how to find this information, and use a variety of methods to reach staff in every part of your business.

Senior leaders should use their communications with staff to send a clear message to employees that equality, diversity and inclusion are a priority for your business. This shouldn't just be a one-off; you should issue regular communications to inform staff of steps you're taking to advance equality and tackle discrimination.

## LEADING ON EQUALITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

You can also include a section on your website to tell your customers and clients about the action you are taking on equality. This will send a clear and public message on your commitment, and position you as a leader on equality and diversity, which can help you attract more business and the best talent.

## PREGNANCY, MATERNITY, AND PARENTAL LEAVE

When your business shows its support to staff who are pregnant or on leave to provide care for a child this has a positive impact on workplace culture, and will help to advance gender equality in your workforce. There are specific steps you should take to do so.



## Policy and practice

You should review your policies on pregnancy and maternity, and other parental policies, to ensure they are consistent with the law and best practice. As with other policies, line managers have a key role in ensuring good practice is implemented, therefore they should be given training in supporting staff who are pregnant, on maternity or other parental leave, or returning to work after this.

## Keeping in Touch

Employers are entitled to make reasonable contact with staff during maternity leave. This might be to discuss arrangements for return to work, or providing an update on development and progression opportunities or significant changes to the workplace.

Women on maternity leave can, by agreement, work for up to 10 days without bringing their leave to an end or affecting their maternity pay. These are called 'Keeping in Touch' (KiT) days. These are designed to let women keep in touch with their employer, and the days can be used for any work-related activity including training or attendance at meetings or conference. This can help women to access development opportunities and keep their skills up to date, which will also benefit your business.

## Return to work

You should ensure you support staff to return to work after maternity or other parental leave, or from a longer career break, for example a break to provide care for a child or relative. Offering specific support can help to make the transition more positive, and to ensure that staff are



supported to find a way to balance their work with caring roles and stay in a role which fully utilises their skills.

You can find more detailed information on pregnancy, maternity, parental leave, and other connected policies in our resources on [pregnancy and maternity](#).

## TAKE SEXUAL HARASSMENT SERIOUSLY

This means having a zero-tolerance approach to sexual harassment where it happens, and acting to prevent it from happening in the first place. What this means in practice is:

- Putting in place a comprehensive policy and process to deal with reports of sexual harassment and ensuring that these are followed,
- Ensuring those who may have to deal with reports and investigations have the support they need to do this well,
- Treating complaints of sexual harassment credibly and investigating them as thoroughly as possible, and
- Ensuring that there are no negative repercussions from reporting.

A sign of a negative workplace culture is a ‘culture of silence’ where no one speaks up, inappropriate behaviour goes unchallenged, and no one feels safe to raise concerns. You should encourage staff to express any concerns they may have. You can do this by issuing an all-staff communication encouraging feedback from employees or using an anonymous survey to gather



staff views. Follow through by demonstrating what you've done to respond to any issues that are highlighted.

For more detailed information you can read our guidance on workplace [sexual harassment](#), how to develop a policy, how to deal with reports, and creating a culture that prevents sexual harassment.

## THINK ABOUT INTERSECTING INEQUALITIES

Businesses should take an intersectional approach when considering and responding to the barriers experienced by women in the workplace. An intersectional approach recognises that women are not a homogenous group and do not experience inequality in the same way. Different groups of women experience multiple, intersecting inequalities and discriminations that overlap and combine to create different levels of inequality. For example, sexism, racism and Islamophobia together shape racially minoritised Muslim women's experiences of inequality and discrimination. In another example, disabled women's experiences will be shaped by sexism and disability discrimination.

You can find more information on intersectional inequalities in our [guidance on taking an anti-racist approach to tackling gender inequality in the workplace](#).



# HEALTH AND SAFETY

## Menopause

You should take steps to increase awareness of menopause and how it impacts women in the workplace by sharing information with staff.

Line managers should be aware of ways in which they can support women in their teams who are experiencing menopause, for example:

- Regular one-to-ones to discuss wellbeing and workload, and any adjustments they need.
- Appropriate return to work support after any long-term absences related to menopause.
- Access to free period products, including specific products for heavy flow.
- Regular breaks and ready access to washroom facilities.

You can find more detailed information in our [resource on creating a menopause-aware workplace](#).

## PPE

If your staff use PPE, you must provide women with appropriate PPE that fits them safely.

## Risk assessment

You should ensure that all people involved in risk assessment and risk management have been trained to be aware of gender differences affecting men's and women's health and safety at work, and that all risk assessments take account of these differences.



## LEADERSHIP

The tone of a workplace is set from the very top of a business and strong leadership is critical to creating an inclusive workplace culture.

The business owner or a member of the leadership team should issue a communication that your business is committed to creating an inclusive culture for all staff. Following up in future staff communications by sharing information on what steps you have taken is a good way to demonstrate transparency and accountability.



Close the Gap works in Scotland on women's labour market participation. We work with policymakers, employers and unions to influence and enable action that will address the causes of women's inequality at work.

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