

SPECTRUM OF SEXUAL MISCONDUCT AT WORK (SSMW – 2018) -- Kathleen Kelley Reardon, Ph.D., Professor Emerita, University of Southern California Marshall School of Business

Decisions about which category a behavior falls into depend on the situation, tone of delivery and nonverbal behaviors. The spectrum is not intended to be a set of cut-and-dried categories. It's a blueprint for organizations – a means of defining levels of offensiveness that can contribute to a hostile work climate as well as types of behaviors that are particularly serious and egregious. The spectrum is a working taxonomy to which additional examples can be added by those using it.

Non-offensive (Common remarks on such things as hair style and dress): “You look nice today,” “I like your haircut,” “Nice outfit,” “That’s a good color on you,” “You look lovely.”

Awkward/Mildly Offensive (Comments involving or implying gender distinctions unfavorable to women): “You would say that as a woman,” “I suppose it’s a woman’s prerogative to change her mind;” “We can’t speak frankly around you women anymore.”

Offensive (Gender-insensitive or superior manner): Holding a woman’s arm while talking to her; uninvited hugs; patronizing, dismissive or exclusionary behavior; making stereotypical jokes about women, blondes, brunettes, red-heads, etc.; implying or stating that women are distracted by family.

Highly Offensive (Intentionally denigrating): Joking or implications about a woman’s intellect or skills being limited due to her gender; labels like “ice queen” or “female mafia;” comments on physical attributes used to embarrass, insult or demean.

Evident Sexual Misconduct (Usually crude or physically intrusive): Looking a woman up and down in a sexually suggestive manner; grabbing, unwelcome holding, touching or kissing; ignoring a woman’s expressed disinterest in a personal or intimate relationship; crude jokes that demean women; describing women with such terms as “slut” or “frigid.”

Egregious Sexual Misconduct (Typically involves coercion, sexual abuse, or assault): Overt sexual behavior while a woman is present; pressing against a woman suggestively; threatening or implying career damage to a woman who refuses to engage in sex or sexual behavior; forcing or coercing a woman to have sex.