

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. Even comments that fall into the “generally not offensive” category can be so if repeated to the point of causing discomfort or said in ways that reach a higher level of offense.

The spectrum is not intended to be a set of cut-and-dried categories. It’s a blueprint for organizations – a way to start talking about levels of offensiveness that can contribute to a hostile work climate as well as what is and isn’t sexual misconduct toward women.

Additional examples can be added, and some existing ones moved by groups, divisions and organizations making the spectrum work for them.

Generally Not-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.