

# Sexualisation of Women in the Workplace research

HARRIET  
WALEY-COHEN

• **TOKEN  
MAN!**

# Introduction

Whenever we talk about gender equality, most people focus on issues such as the gender pay gap, the glass ceiling and microaggressions. However the reality is that the sexualisation of women is still prominent in the workplace, and is something that women are constantly managing every day.

And we can only tackle it if we talk about it. We cannot have equality, mutual respect and genuine psychological safety in the workplace until we all come together to tackle the issue of the sexualisation of women at work, and in the wider world.

This report is designed to to bring about a greater understanding of women's experiences in the workplace, highlight the challenges that exist, create discussion and act as a platform for change.



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**Context**





# Our definition

Sexualisation of women in the workplace occurs when a woman is made to feel as though her value derives from her sexual appeal or behaviour and / or when other attributes such as experience, intelligence, expertise, are minimised or disregarded. When a person is sexually objectified, they have been sexualised.

The behaviour of the business can contribute to sexualisation of women in a broader context e.g. through its media campaign, clothing requirements or culture of normalising the sexualisation of women.

This often contributes to objectification, exclusion and sexual harassment.



# Overview

# Overview

**55%**

Have experienced being sexualised in the workplace

**29%**

Reported it or spoke up

**79%**

Have had to adapt their behaviour as a result

**50%**

Have considered leaving their job as a result

**40%**

Say they have someone in the workplace whose inappropriate behaviour is known but tolerated

# **Why your organisation needs to consider this topic**

Companies where women are sexualised are likely to face a negative impact on their client and staff retention and attraction, on creativity, productivity, team cohesion, culture, performance and ultimately, their overall success

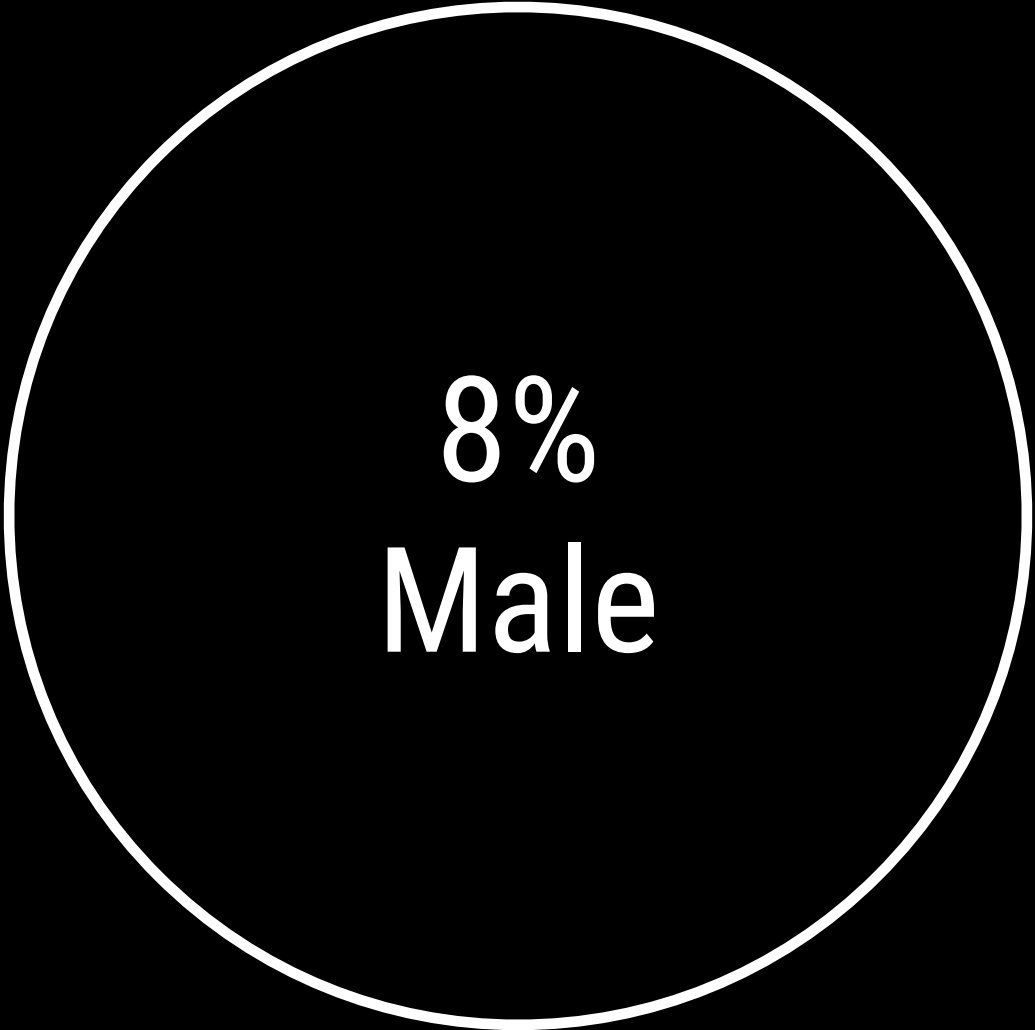
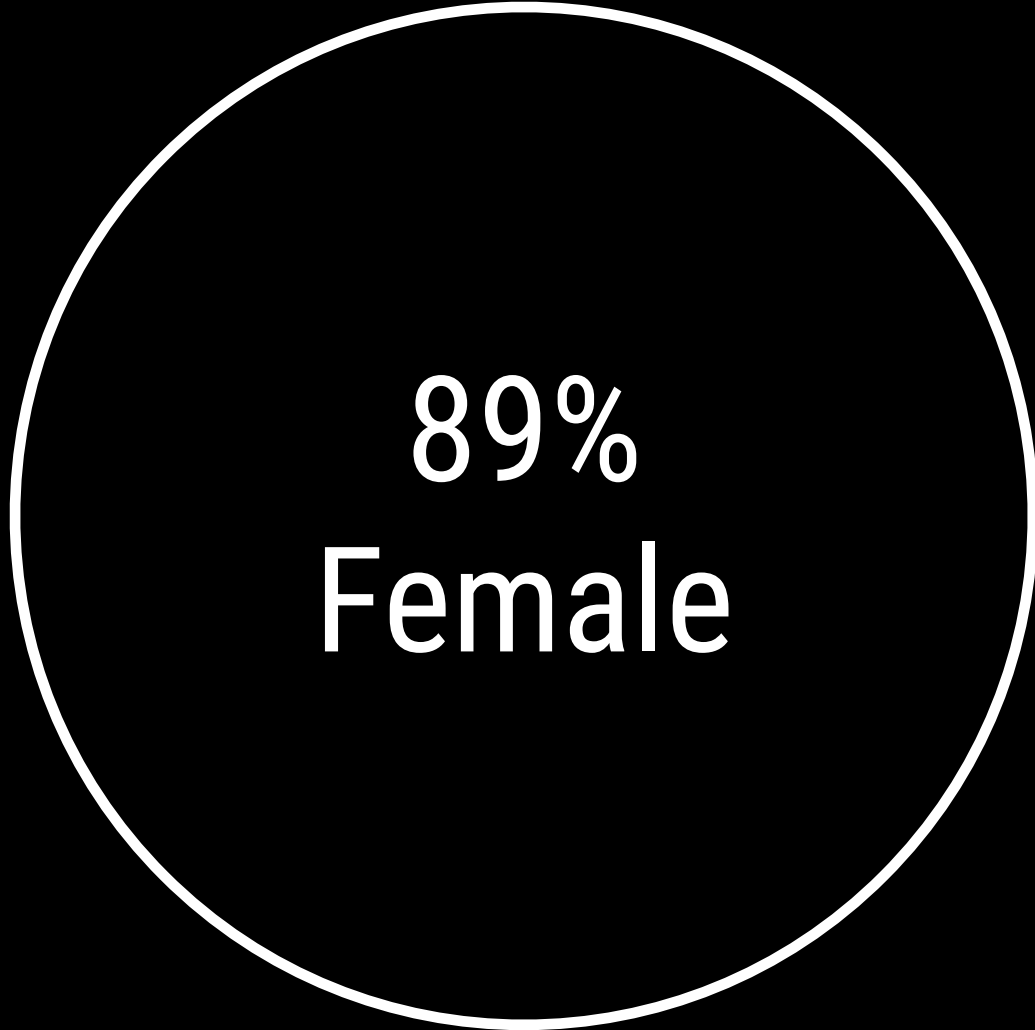
Left untackled, businesses risk costly brand scandals and the possibility of legal action if harassment or abuse then occurs, especially if it isn't dealt with adequately or star players are allowed to stay on despite unacceptable behaviour This is not just a moral issue, this issue is central to the future success and culture of all organisations.

We would urge you to keep these points in mind as you digest this report.

**Our respondents**



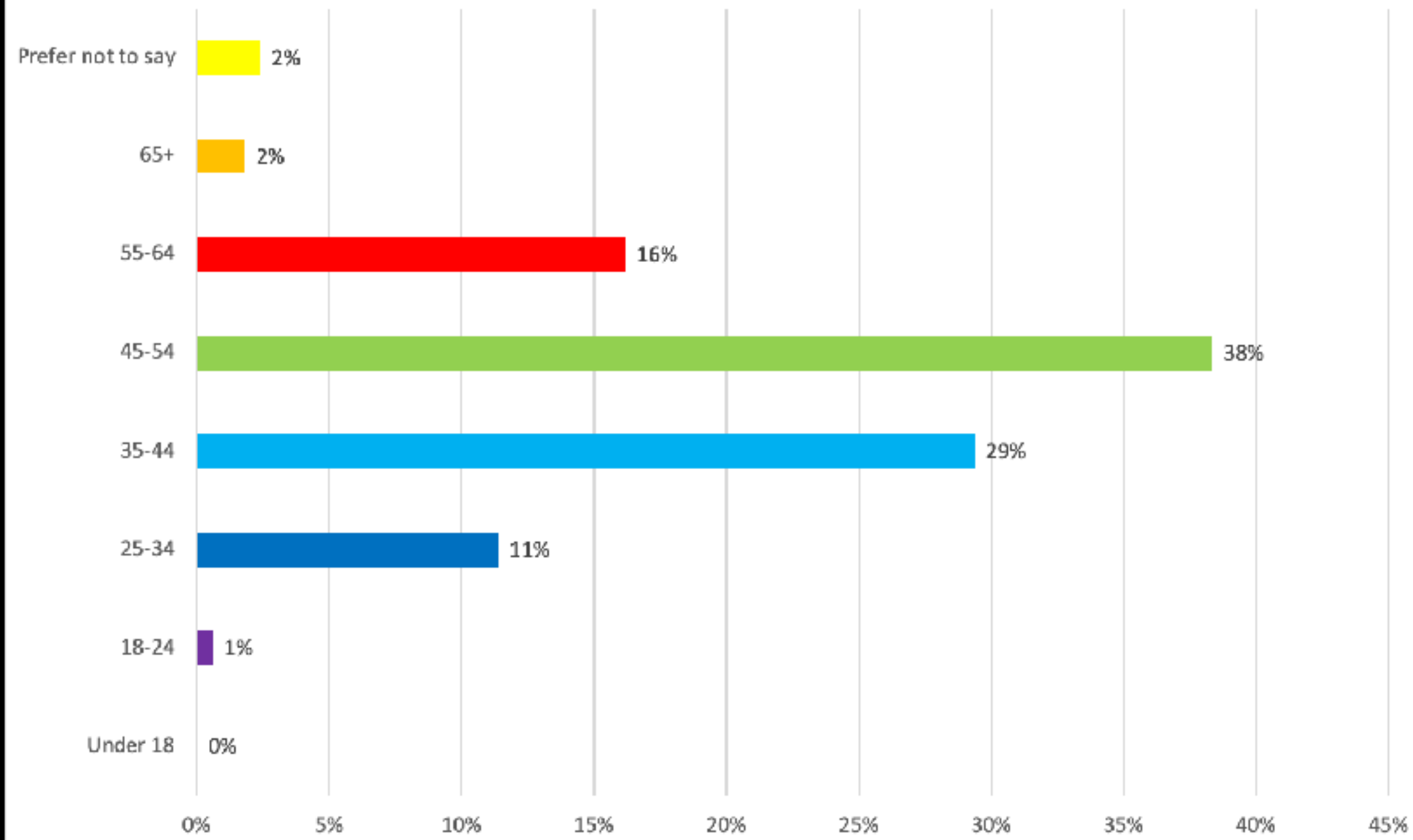
# Our respondents\*



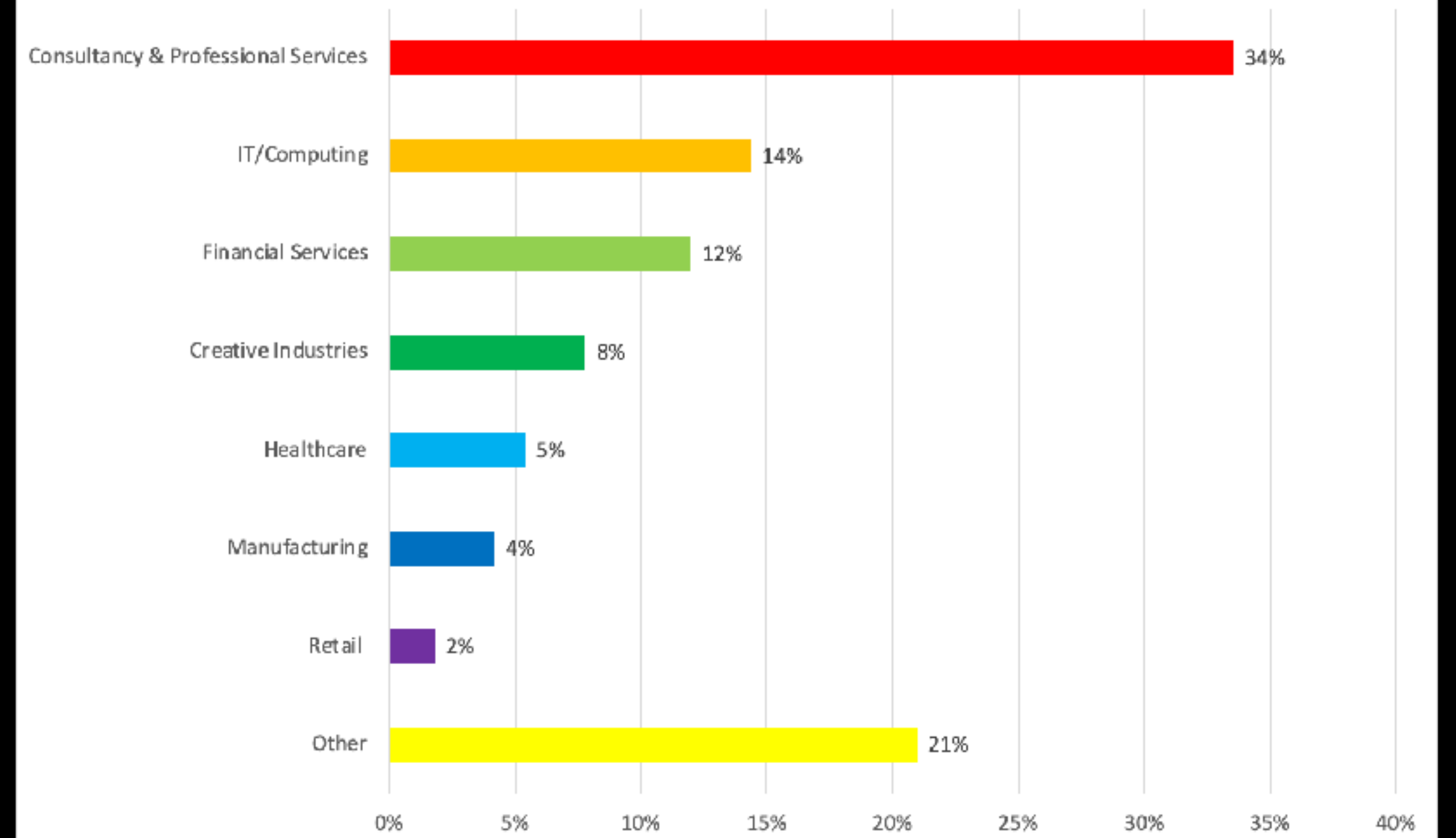
\*Sample size: Over 150 respondents

# Our respondents

## Age



## Sector



# Some notes about the report

All themes throughout are shown in order of prevalence ie the first one is the one that came up the most in the survey.

All quotes are verbatim and .



# Survey results

**In your current workplace have you ever experienced women being sexualised?**

**Yes**

**55%**

**No**

**32%**

**Unsure**

**23%**

**If so, what did it involve**



# Themes

Lewd/Sexist  
comments

Objectification

Sexual  
Harrassment

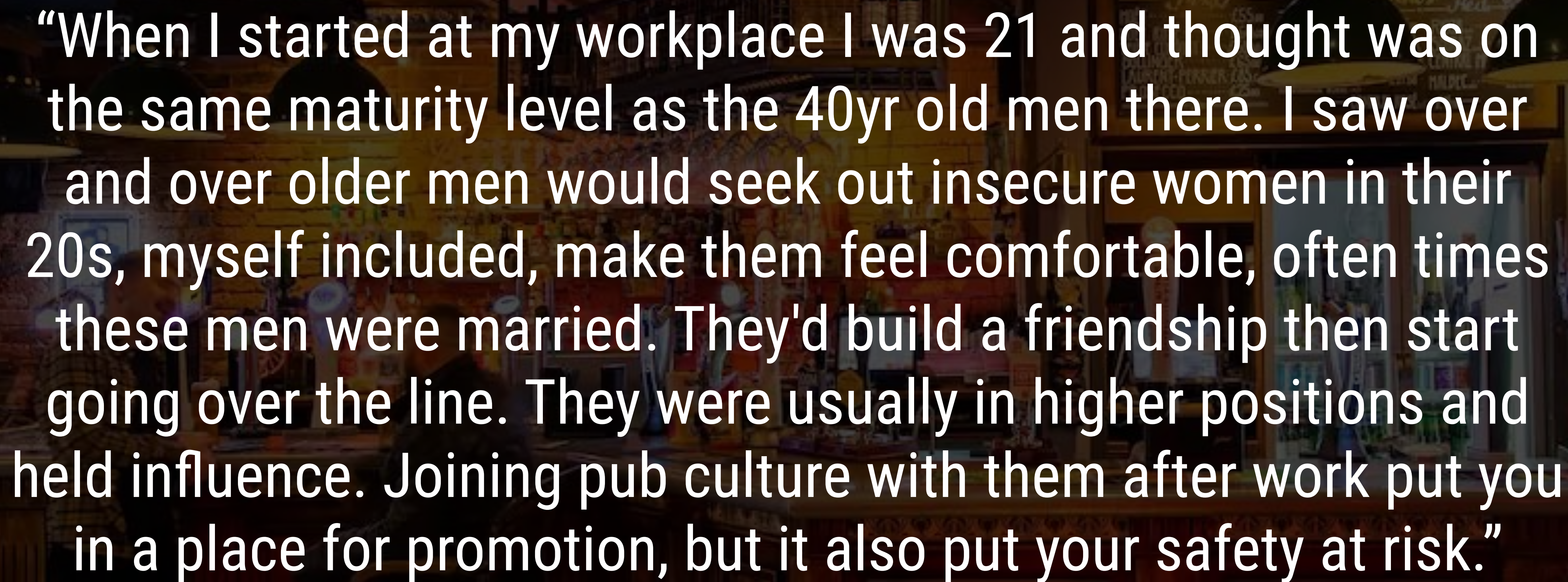
Unwanted  
touching

Leering

Note: Here and throughout document, themes are shown in order of prevalence

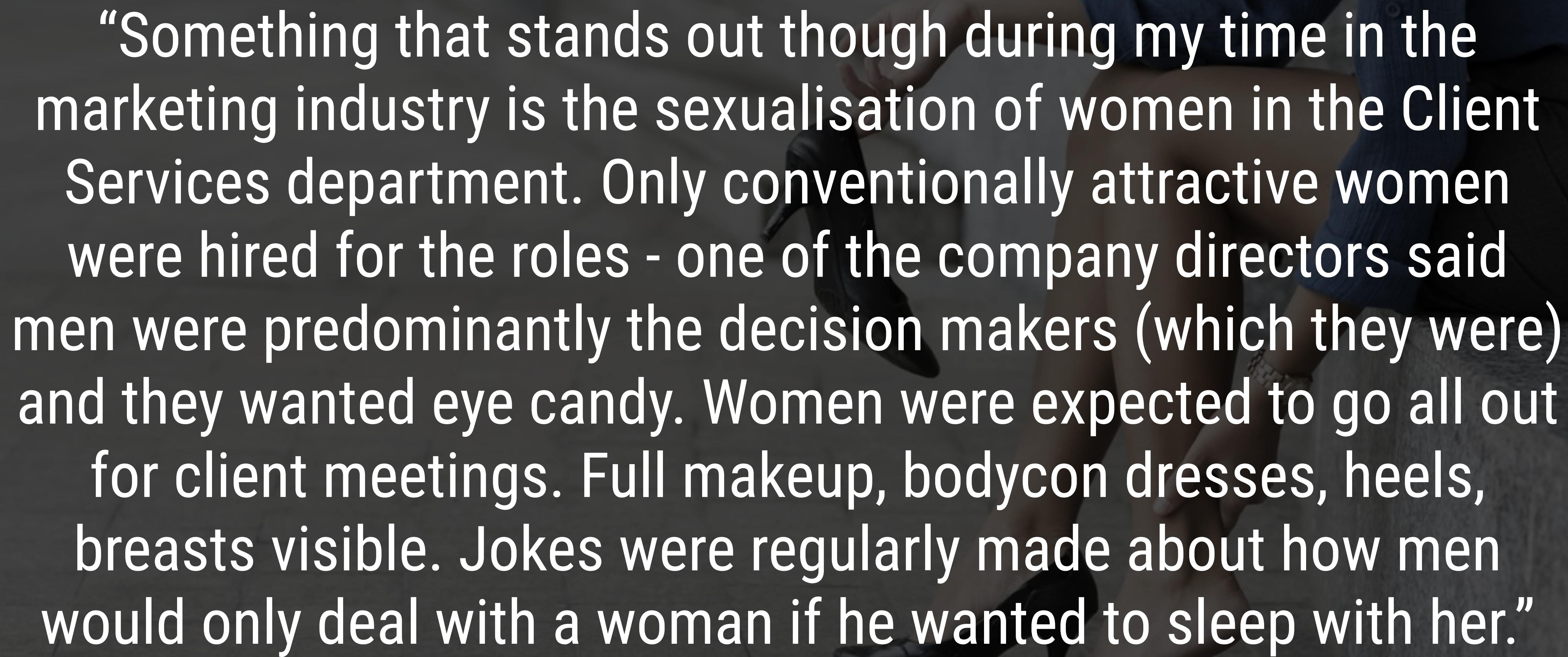
“So many, many incidents over the years - it has affected how I conduct myself at work, my confidence levels, my ability to progress... A few examples include: Unwanted sexts and subsequent threats of being fired if I told anyone. This then played out into not being fairly treated when promotions or pay rises were given out to male colleagues... My manager (c-suite level) trying to get into my hotel room after a company event with me giving zero indication that I wanted that to happen.”



A dimly lit pub interior with wooden walls and hanging lamps. The scene is slightly blurred, showing a bar area with stools and a counter in the background. The lighting is warm and low, creating a cozy atmosphere.

“When I started at my workplace I was 21 and thought was on the same maturity level as the 40yr old men there. I saw over and over older men would seek out insecure women in their 20s, myself included, make them feel comfortable, often times these men were married. They'd build a friendship then start going over the line. They were usually in higher positions and held influence. Joining pub culture with them after work put you in a place for promotion, but it also put your safety at risk.”



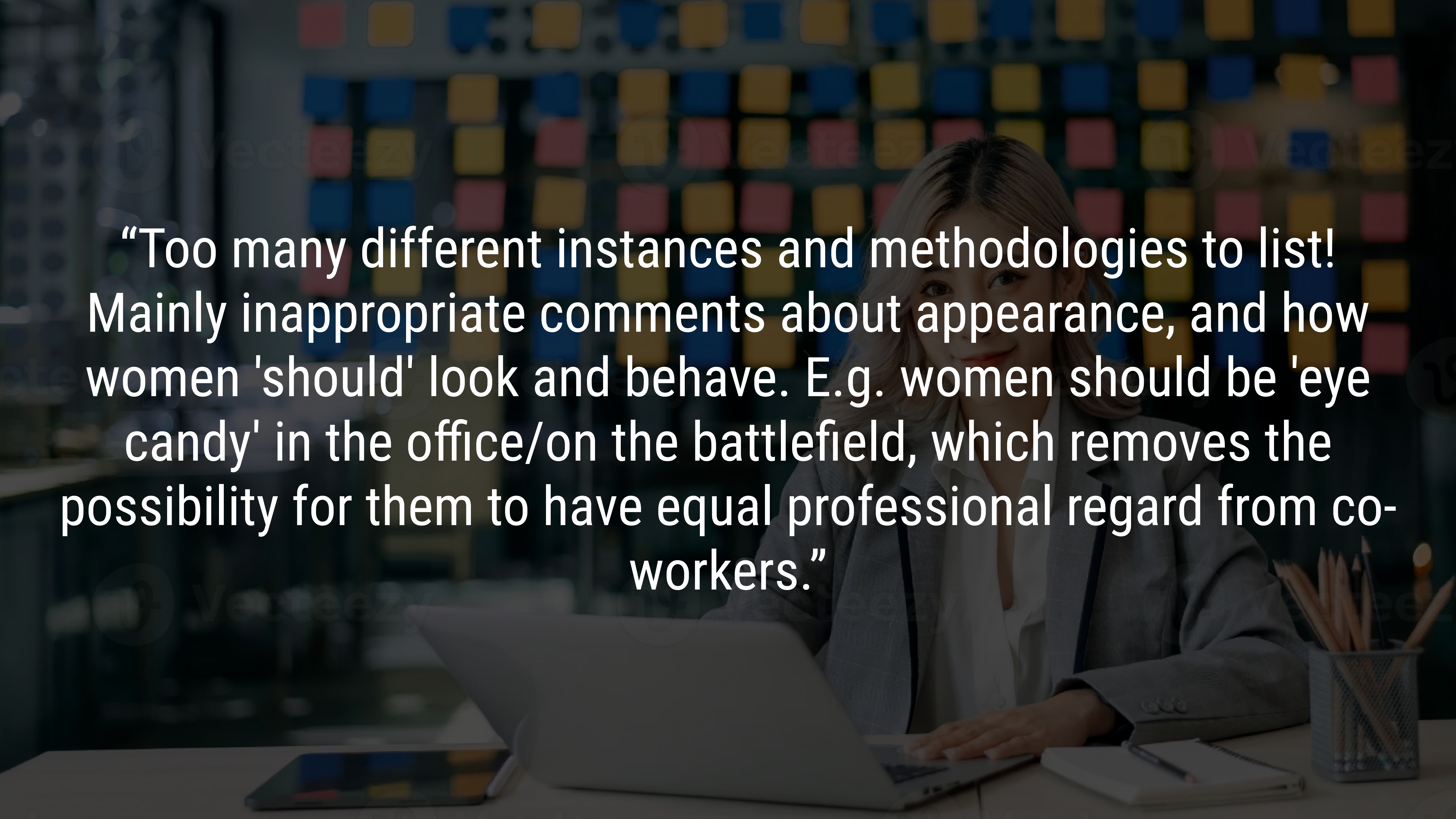
A woman in a blue blazer and high heels is sitting on a chair, with another person's hand on her back. The background is a blurred indoor setting.

“Something that stands out though during my time in the marketing industry is the sexualisation of women in the Client Services department. Only conventionally attractive women were hired for the roles - one of the company directors said men were predominantly the decision makers (which they were) and they wanted eye candy. Women were expected to go all out for client meetings. Full makeup, bodycon dresses, heels, breasts visible. Jokes were regularly made about how men would only deal with a woman if he wanted to sleep with her.”




“Manager’s mentioned menstruation - oh, you must be on your period. Comments such as ‘of course you can bother me looking like that’. ‘Why don’t you just show a little more cleavage and you’ll be able to influence them’. I used to work for a printing business. I used to hate going into the dark room as I always ran the risk of being groped. The guys used to switch their machines off when I walked past them to just stand and stare at me. Repeated requests for dates and following me into enclosed spaces. Enacting sexual poses when walking past men.”



A woman with blonde hair, wearing a grey blazer over a white shirt, is sitting at a desk. She is looking towards the camera with a slight smile. In front of her is an open laptop. To her right is a pen holder with several pencils. The background is a wall covered in a grid of colorful sticky notes in shades of blue, yellow, pink, and purple. The overall scene is dimly lit, with the text overlaid in white.

“Too many different instances and methodologies to list! Mainly inappropriate comments about appearance, and how women 'should' look and behave. E.g. women should be 'eye candy' in the office/on the battlefield, which removes the possibility for them to have equal professional regard from co-workers.”





“Female managers telling you get female staff “tits and teeth” before going in to a client meeting. Deliberately sending attractive female staff to meeting with certain clients. Frankly, there are so many instances I’d need a lifetime to write them all.”

**Speaking up**



# Did anyone speak up or report it?

Yes

No

Unsure

Other

29%

49%

11%

11%

# Other responses

I did a few times but it never played out in my favour. I found myself worse off.

I'm still hesitating because it is hard to pinpoint anything hard and fast to evidence it

Eventually, one did. And like a flood came more. The workplace culture changed for a year or so, then history started to repeat

No witnesses. I reported it 6 months later.

**What do you think leads to the sexualisation of women in the workplace?**

# Key Issues

Masculine/Male  
Dominated  
Culture

Societal Norms

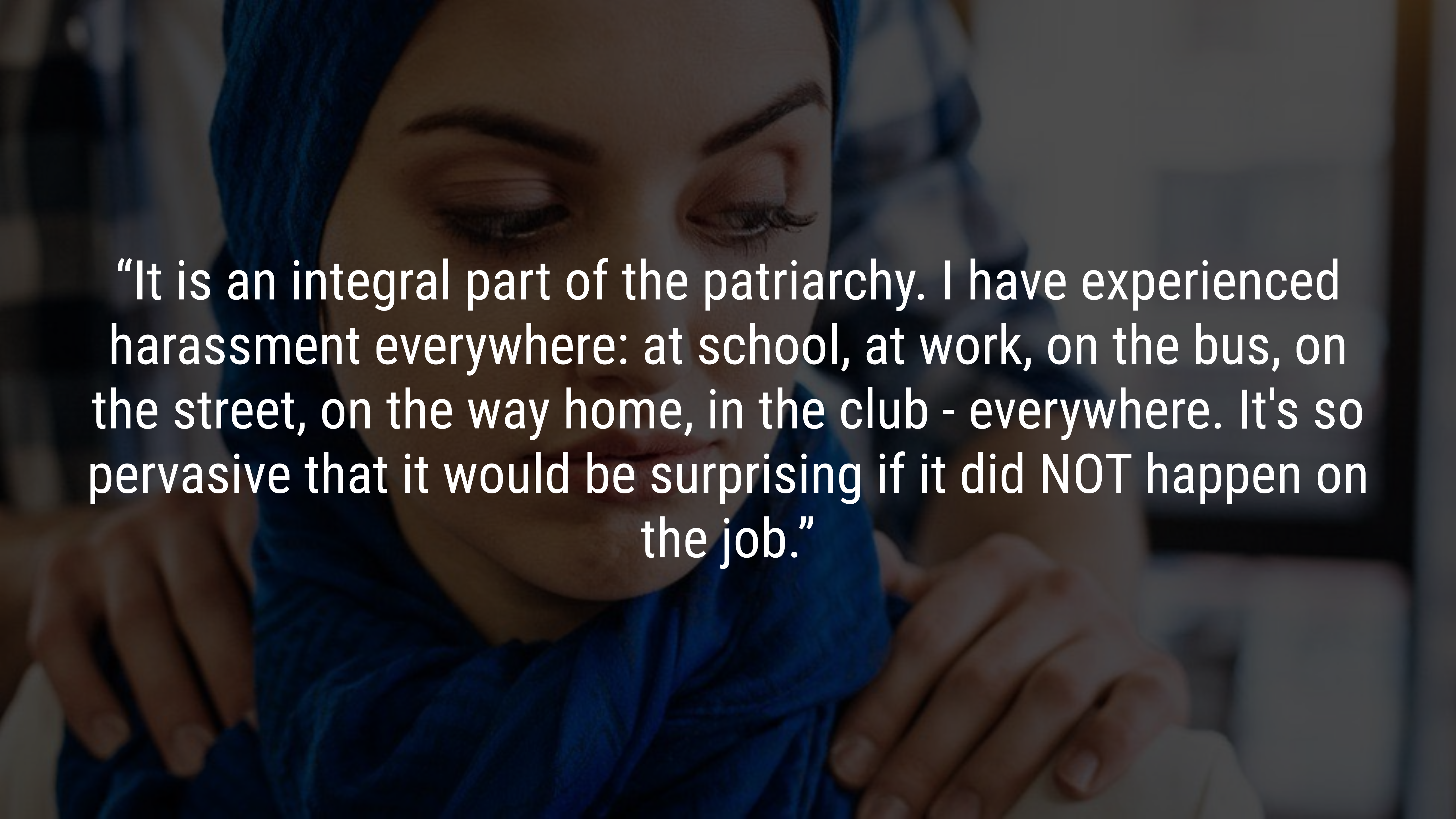
Underlying  
culture/  
Banter

Men's  
Entitlement/  
Power Dyamics

Men's  
ignorance/  
Outdated  
attitude

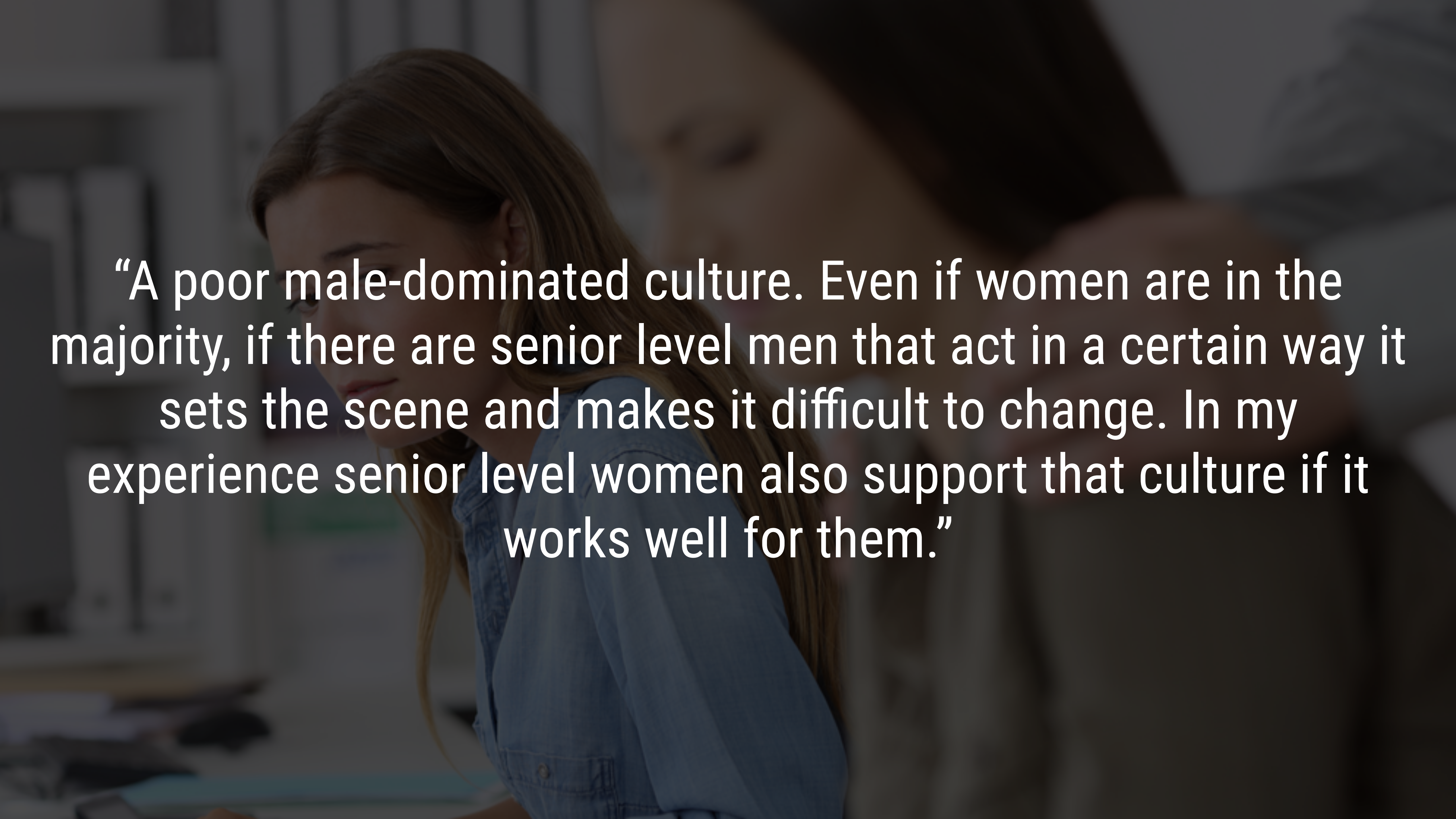
Misogyny



A close-up photograph of a woman wearing a blue hijab. Her eyes are closed, and she has a serene expression. Two hands are gently holding her face from the sides. The background is softly blurred, suggesting an indoor setting with other people present.

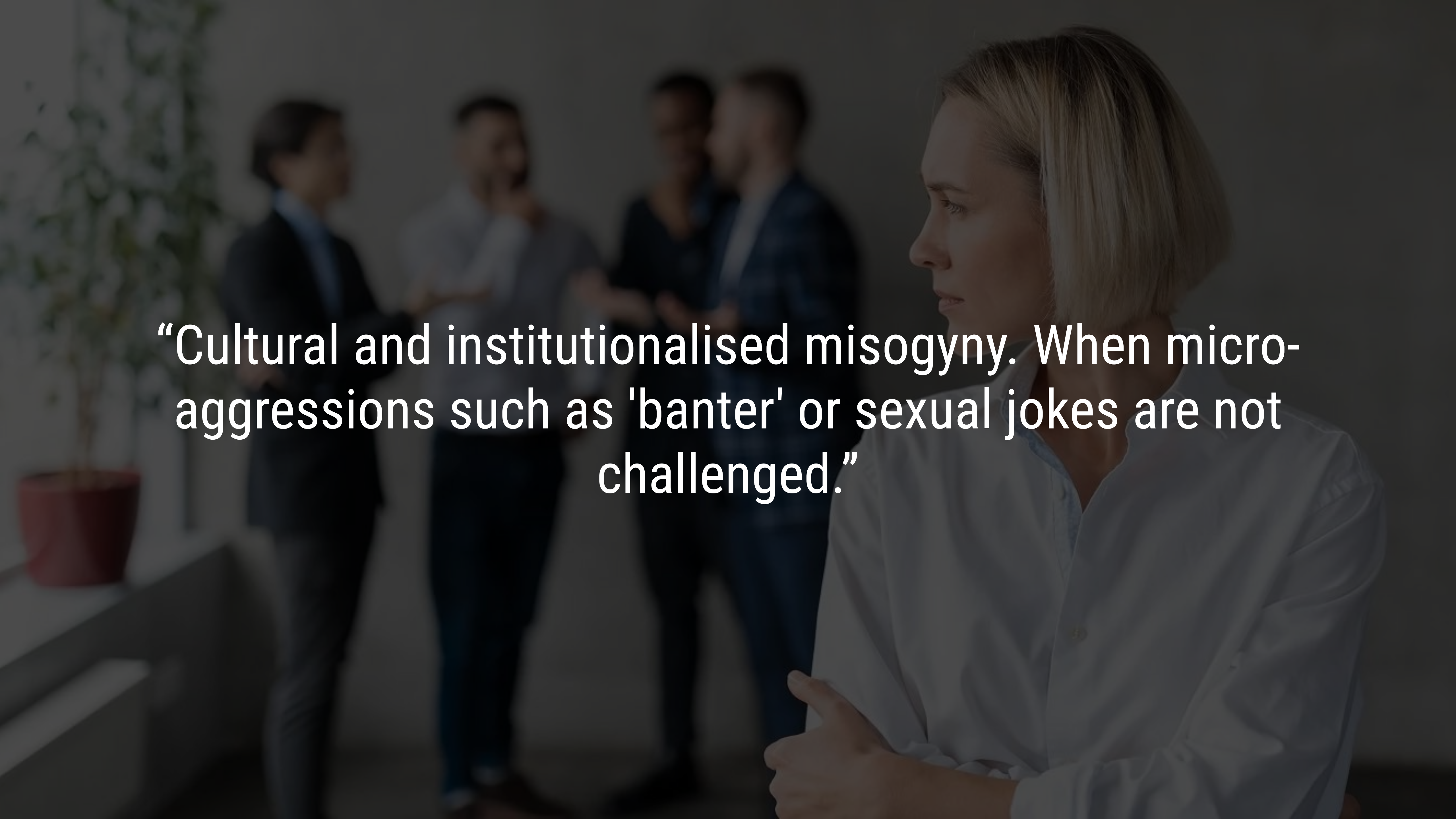
“It is an integral part of the patriarchy. I have experienced harassment everywhere: at school, at work, on the bus, on the street, on the way home, in the club - everywhere. It's so pervasive that it would be surprising if it did NOT happen on the job.”



A woman with long brown hair, wearing a light blue button-down shirt, is looking down and to the left. She is in a meeting room with other people blurred in the background. The text is overlaid on the image in white.

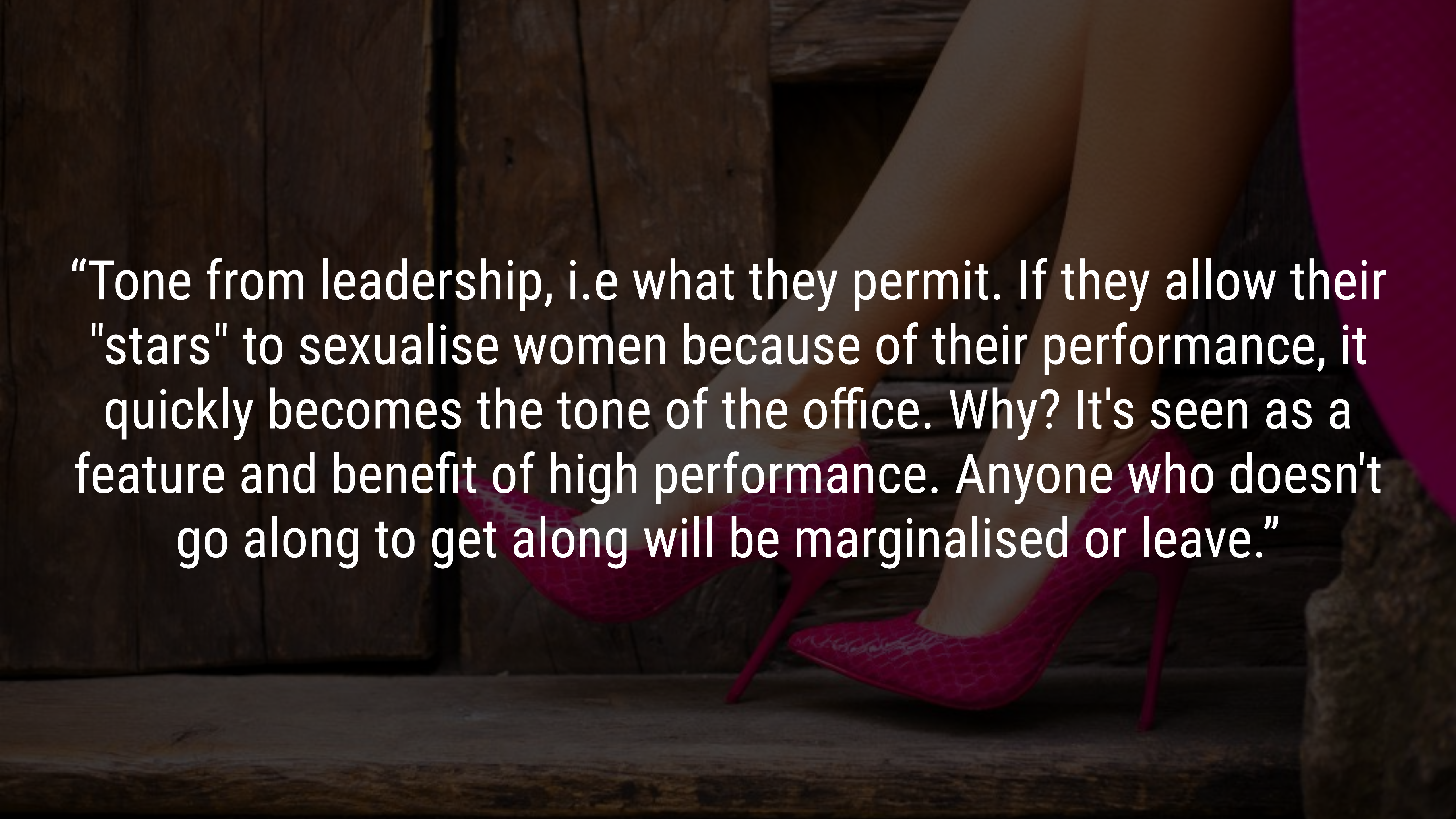
“A poor male-dominated culture. Even if women are in the majority, if there are senior level men that act in a certain way it sets the scene and makes it difficult to change. In my experience senior level women also support that culture if it works well for them.”



A woman with short blonde hair, wearing a white button-down shirt, is shown in profile, looking thoughtfully to the left. She is in the foreground, with her hands clasped. The background is a blurred office environment with several other people in business attire standing and talking. The overall lighting is soft and slightly dim, creating a professional and contemplative atmosphere.

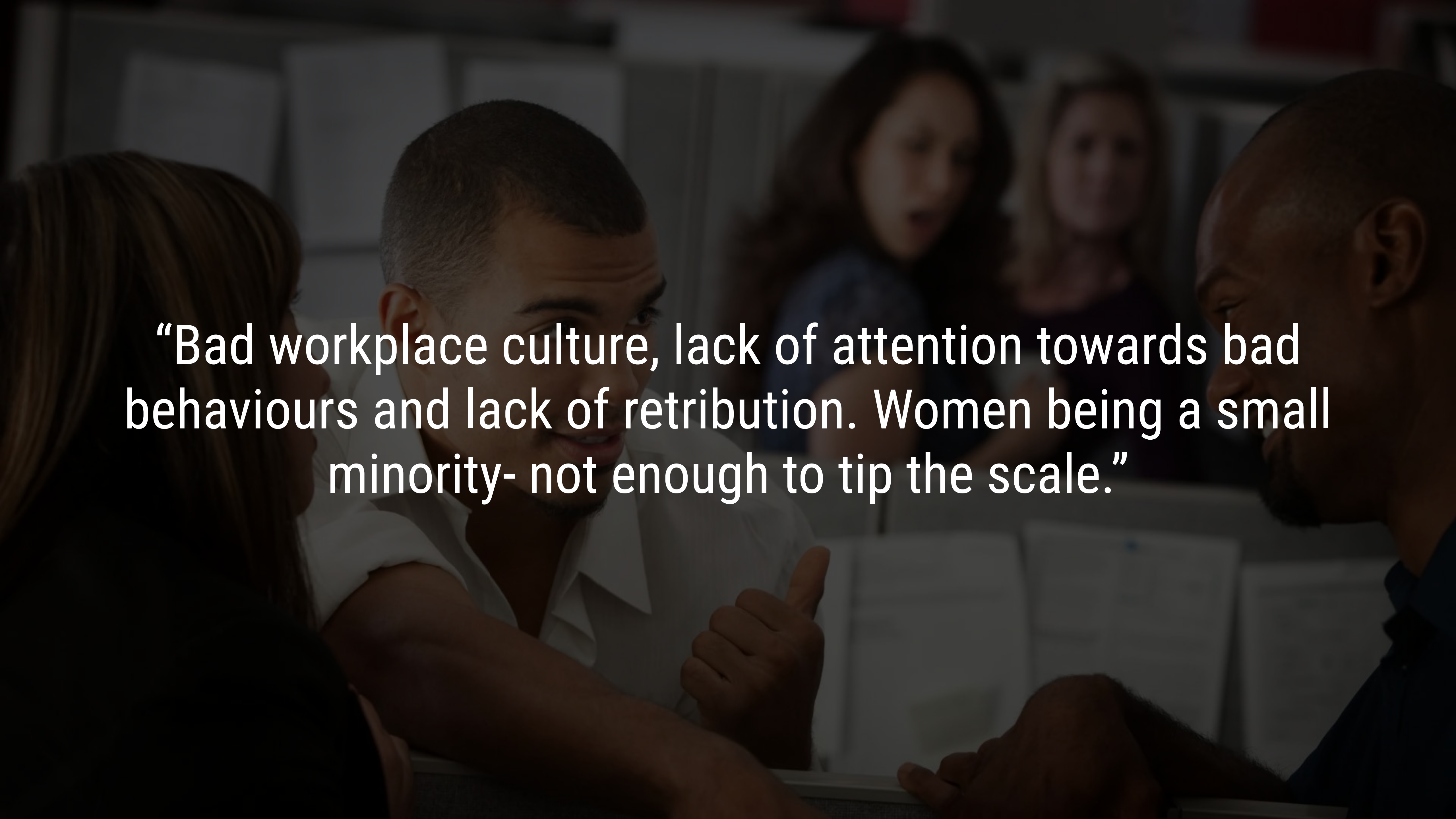
“Cultural and institutionalised misogyny. When micro-aggressions such as 'banter' or sexual jokes are not challenged.”



A photograph of a woman's legs from the knees down, wearing bright pink high-heeled shoes. She is standing on a light-colored wooden floor. The background is a dark, textured wall. The image is dimly lit, with the text overlaid in white.

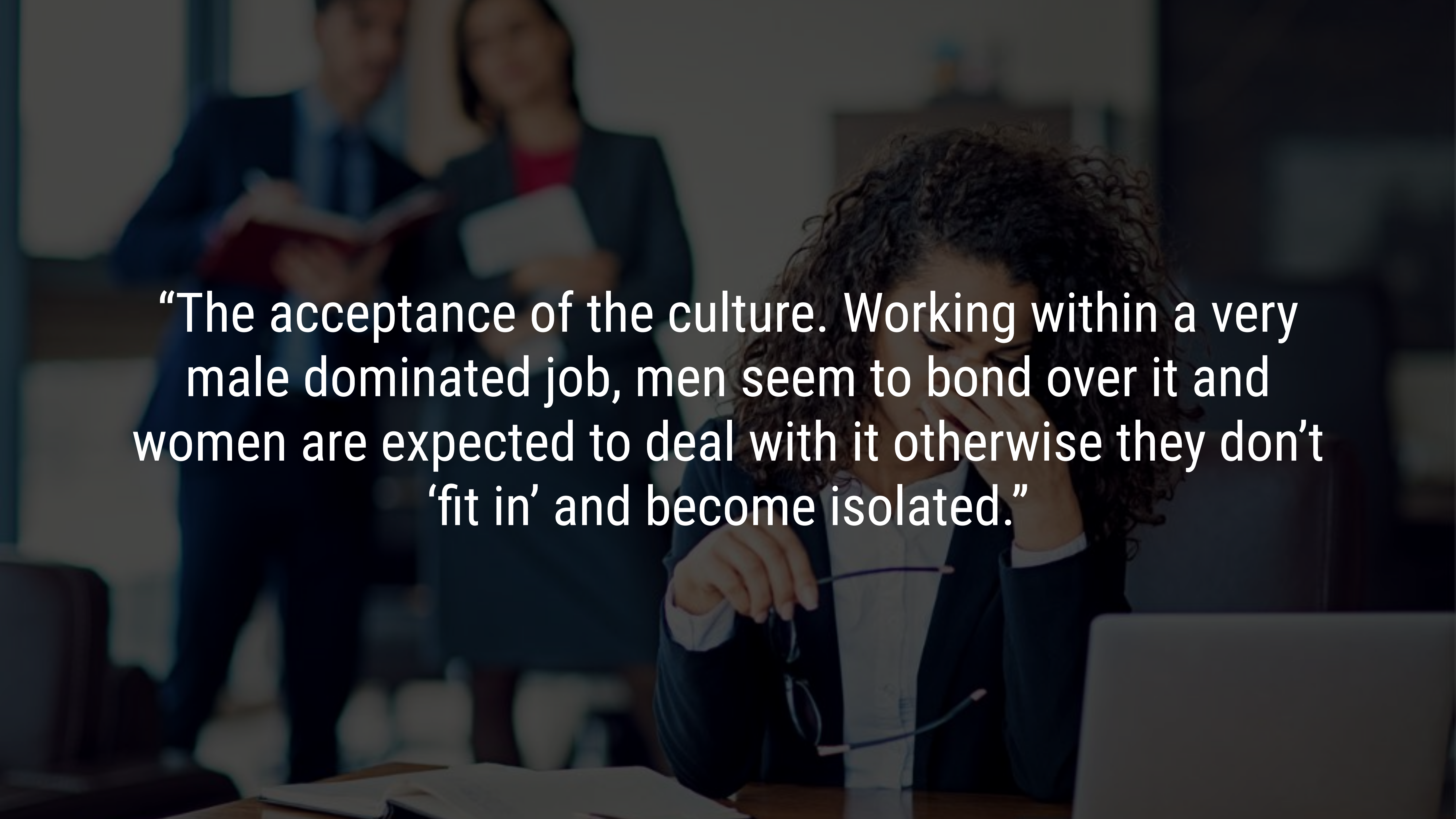
“Tone from leadership, i.e what they permit. If they allow their "stars" to sexualise women because of their performance, it quickly becomes the tone of the office. Why? It's seen as a feature and benefit of high performance. Anyone who doesn't go along to get along will be marginalised or leave.”



A group of diverse business professionals in an office setting. In the foreground, a man with a short haircut is looking towards a woman on the left. In the background, two women are looking towards the right. The image is dimly lit and has a dark overlay. A white text quote is centered over the image.

“Bad workplace culture, lack of attention towards bad behaviours and lack of retribution. Women being a small minority- not enough to tip the scale.”



A woman with curly hair is sitting at a desk with a laptop, looking stressed and covering her face with her hand. In the background, other people are working in an office setting. The image is dimly lit and has a dark overlay.

“The acceptance of the culture. Working within a very male dominated job, men seem to bond over it and women are expected to deal with it otherwise they don’t ‘fit in’ and become isolated.”

**Have you had to adapt your  
behaviour as a result of a  
culture of women being  
sexualised?**



# Have you had to adapt your behaviour?

Yes

No

Prefer not to  
say

79%

20%

1%

**Have you ever considered  
leaving or left a job because of  
a culture of sexualising women  
in the company?**

# Considered leaving or left a job as a result?

Yes

No

Prefer not  
to say

Other

50%

41%

2%

7%



**Looking at your company culture, what's the one thing that would make the biggest difference to combatting the sexualisation of women in the workplace?**

# Key changes

Management  
take it seriously:  
effective  
grievance

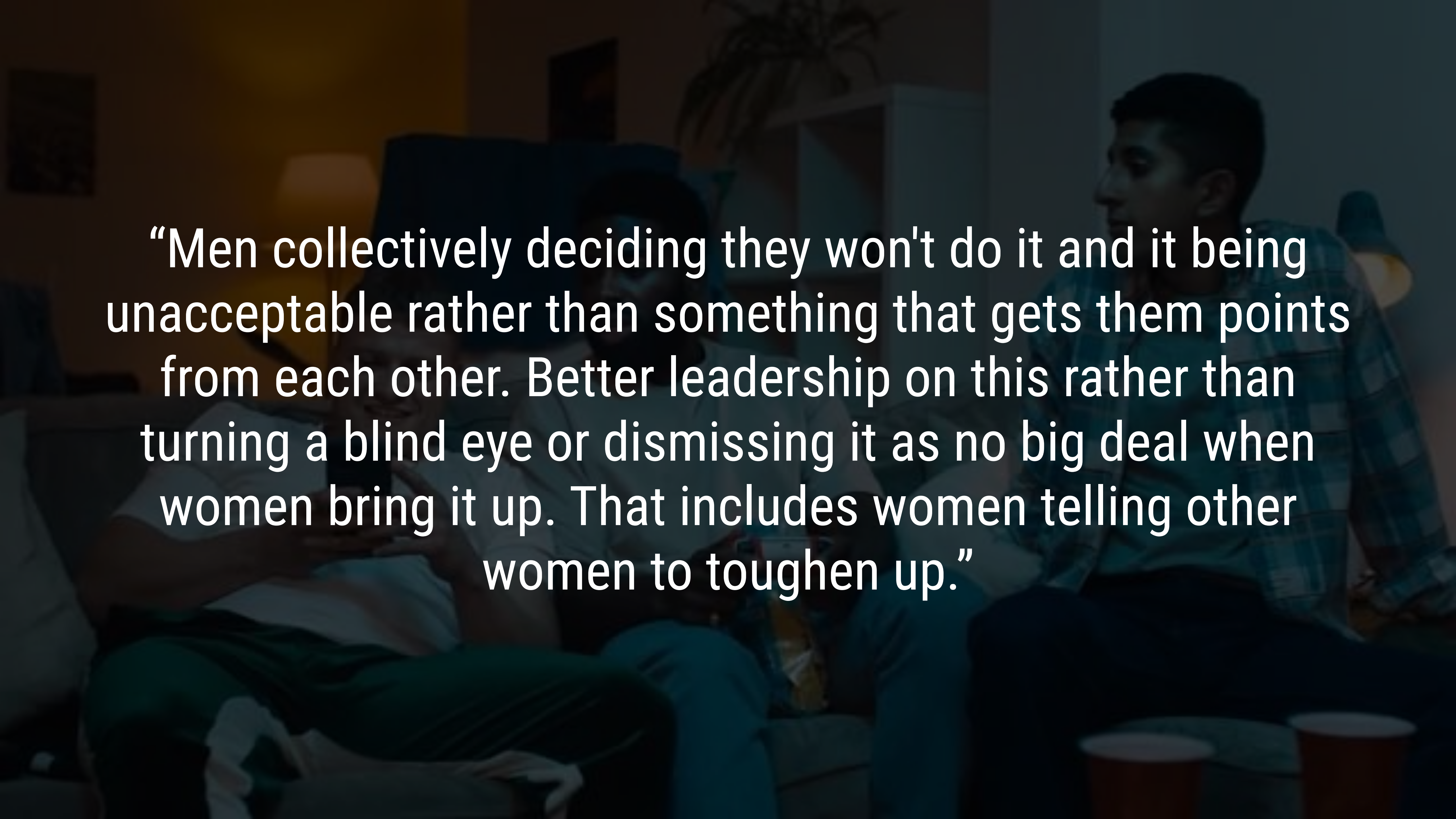
Open your eyes!  
Accept this is a  
real issue

More women,  
especially at  
the top

Stop victim  
blaming women  
and properly  
educate men

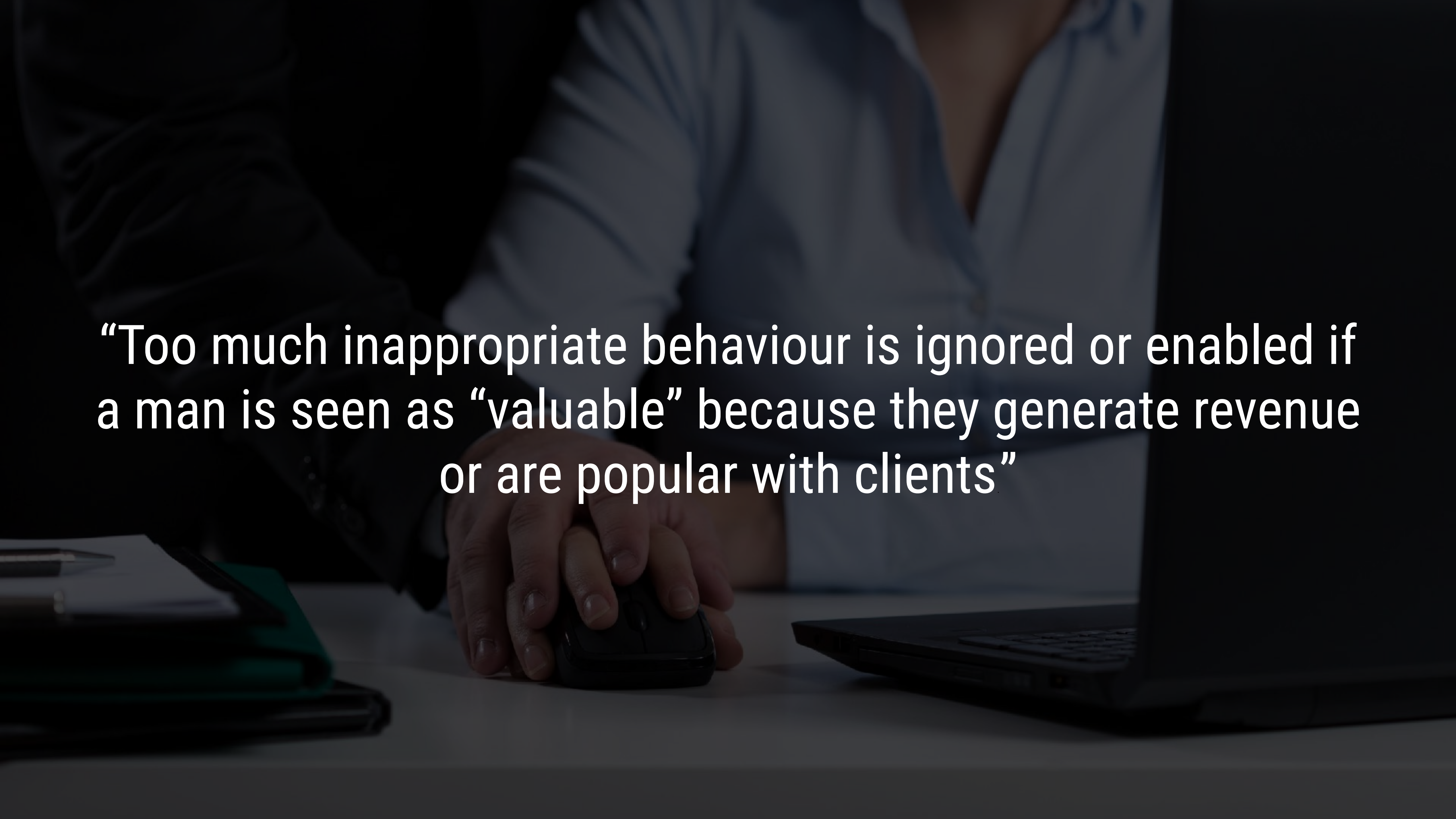
Reject it as  
a way of  
bonding or point  
scoring, instead  
call it out



A group of people are seated around a table in a meeting room. A man in a plaid shirt is speaking to the group. The scene is dimly lit, with a blueish tint. The text is overlaid on the image in white.

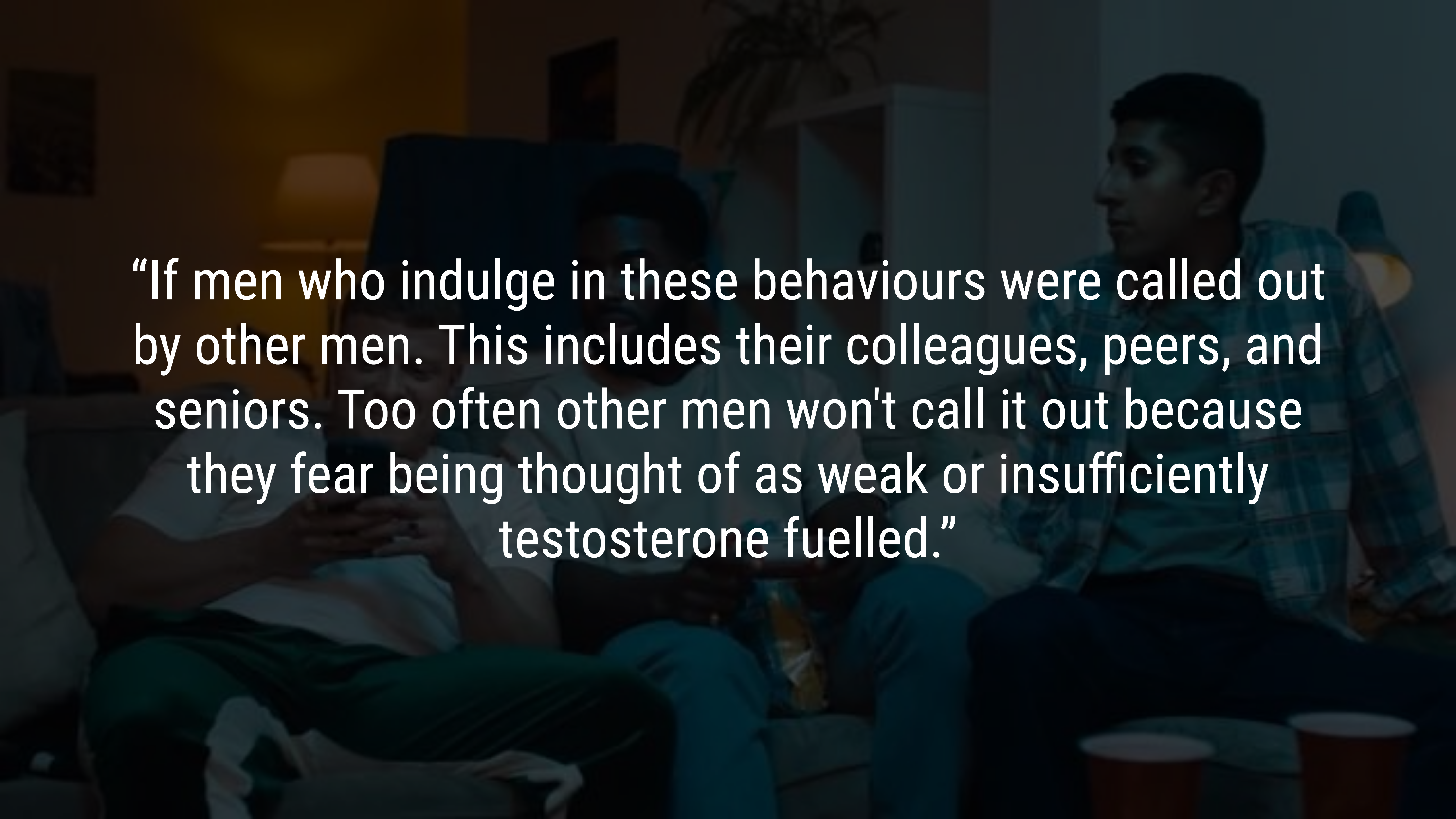
“Men collectively deciding they won't do it and it being unacceptable rather than something that gets them points from each other. Better leadership on this rather than turning a blind eye or dismissing it as no big deal when women bring it up. That includes women telling other women to toughen up.”



A person wearing a light blue button-down shirt is sitting at a desk, using a black computer mouse with their right hand. The background is dark and out of focus, showing a laptop and some papers on the desk. The overall lighting is dim, creating a professional and focused atmosphere.


“Too much inappropriate behaviour is ignored or enabled if a man is seen as “valuable” because they generate revenue or are popular with clients”



A group of men are seated around a table in a dimly lit room, possibly a bar or lounge. The scene is overlaid with a dark, semi-transparent filter. The men are engaged in conversation, with one man in the foreground looking towards the right. The text is centered over the image in a white, sans-serif font.


“If men who indulge in these behaviours were called out by other men. This includes their colleagues, peers, and seniors. Too often other men won't call it out because they fear being thought of as weak or insufficiently testosterone fuelled.”



A woman with short blonde hair, wearing a light blue blazer, is the central focus. She has a thoughtful or slightly concerned expression, looking down and to her left. The background is a blurred office meeting room with several other people seated at tables. The overall lighting is soft and professional.

“People opening their eyes to it. And thinking... is that appropriate behaviour?”



A group of young men are sitting on a couch in a dimly lit room. They are looking at their phones. The room has a warm, orange glow from a lamp on the left and a cooler, blue glow from a lamp on the right. The text is overlaid in the center of the image.

“Zero tolerance, like we have for discriminatory behaviour.”

**What role do you think men have  
in changing the current  
prevalence of sexualisation of  
women?**



# What men can do

Be an ally: role  
model respect for  
women

Take women's  
complaints  
seriously

Call out  
other men,  
especially if  
women aren't  
present

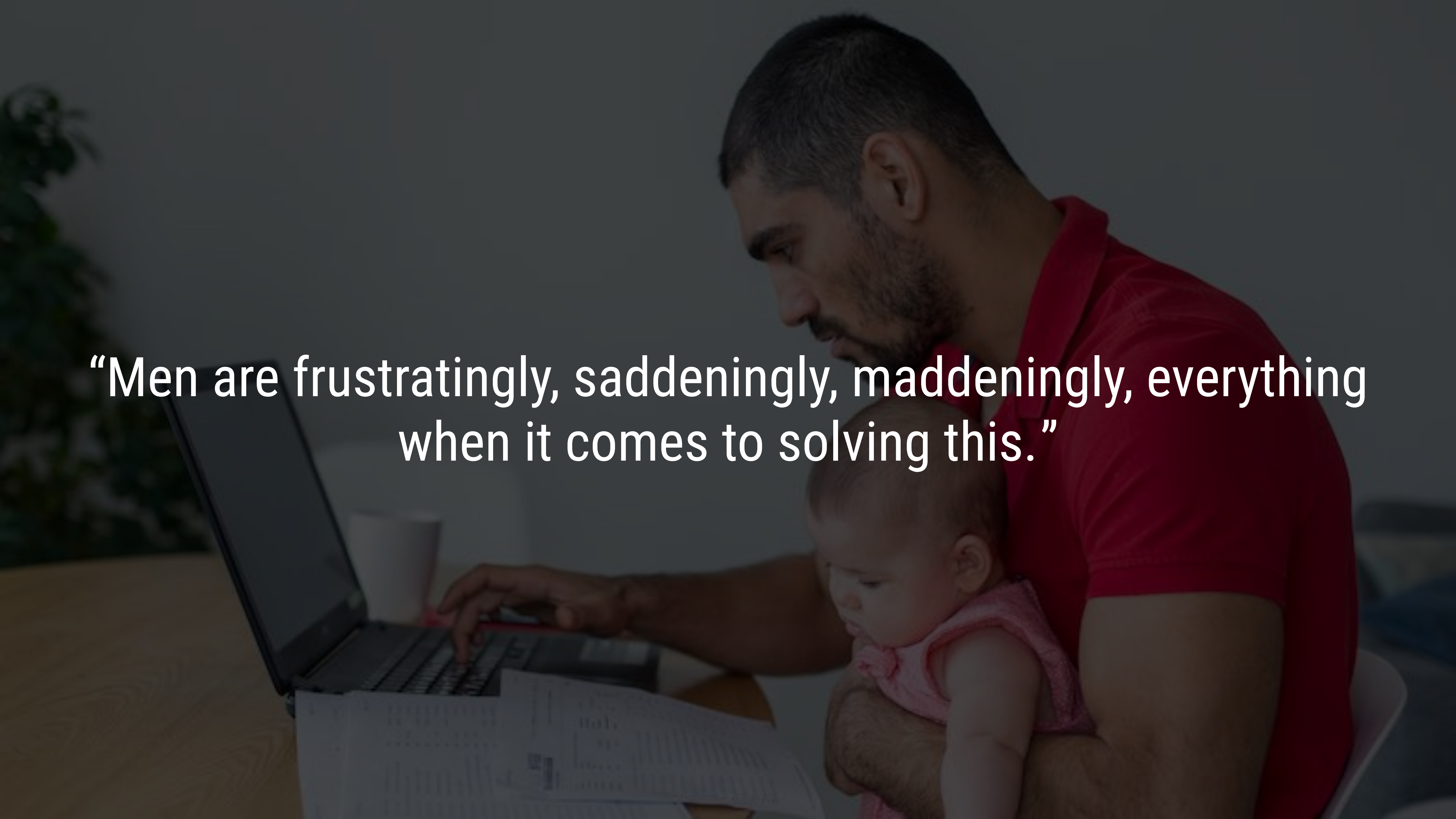
Support other  
men who speak  
up

Education:  
children,  
teenagers, grown  
men

“Be champions, not predators.”

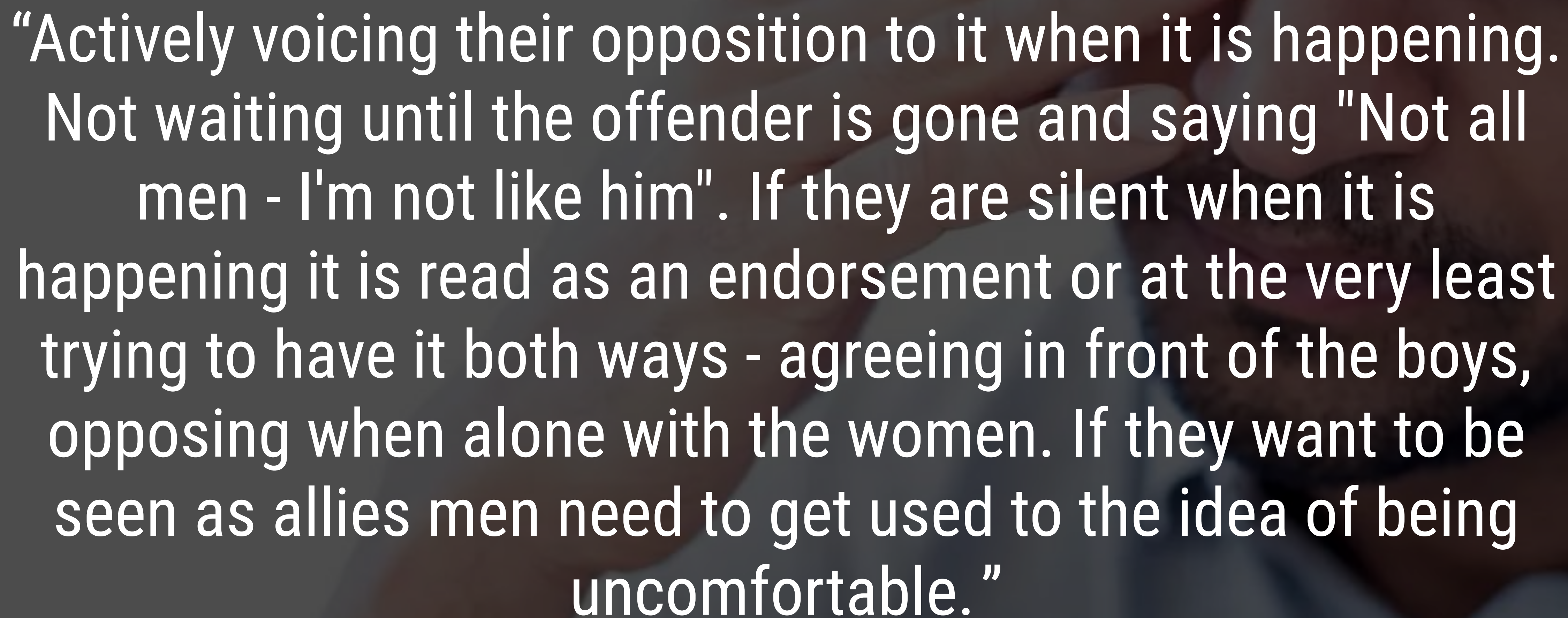
I am  
*K*enough.





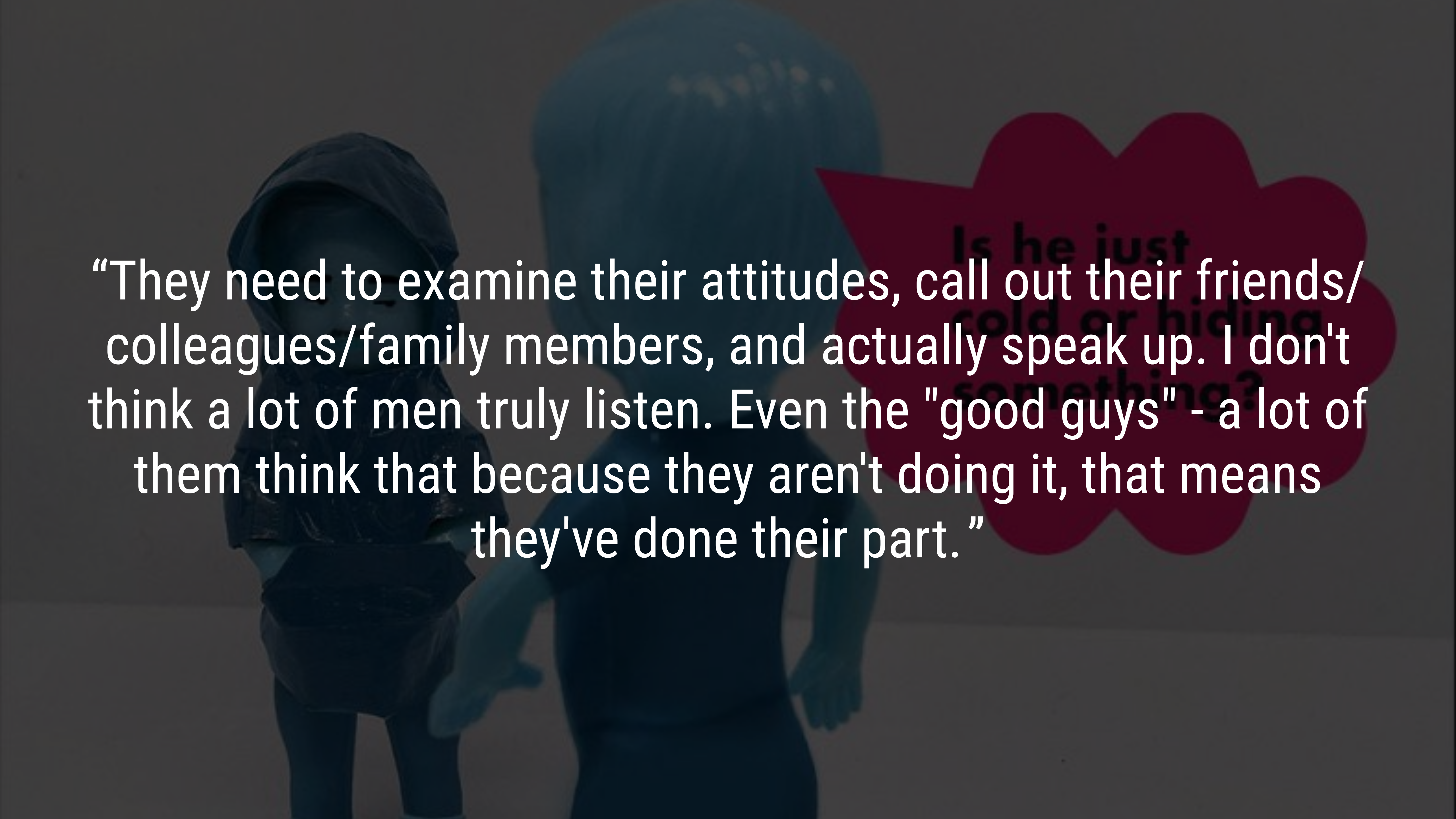
“Men are frustratingly, saddeningly, maddeningly, everything when it comes to solving this.”





“Actively voicing their opposition to it when it is happening. Not waiting until the offender is gone and saying “Not all men - I’m not like him”. If they are silent when it is happening it is read as an endorsement or at the very least trying to have it both ways - agreeing in front of the boys, opposing when alone with the women. If they want to be seen as allies men need to get used to the idea of being uncomfortable.”

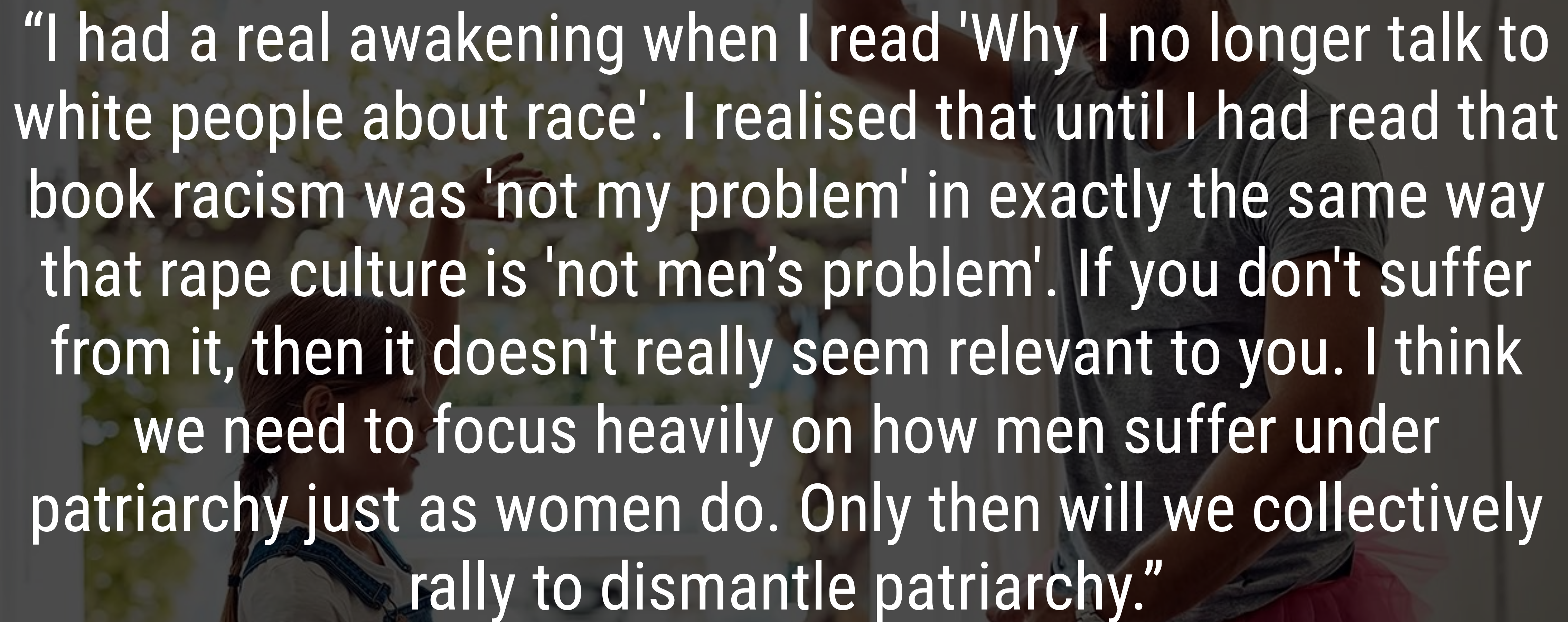




“They need to examine their attitudes, call out their friends/colleagues/family members, and actually speak up. I don't think a lot of men truly listen. Even the "good guys" - a lot of them think that because they aren't doing it, that means they've done their part.”

Is he just  
cold or hiding  
something?



A man and a young girl are dancing together in a room. The man is wearing a grey t-shirt and a watch, and the girl is wearing a white shirt and a blue denim vest over a purple tutu. They are both smiling and looking at each other. The background is a simple room with a white wall and a window.

“I had a real awakening when I read 'Why I no longer talk to white people about race'. I realised that until I had read that book racism was 'not my problem' in exactly the same way that rape culture is 'not men's problem'. If you don't suffer from it, then it doesn't really seem relevant to you. I think we need to focus heavily on how men suffer under patriarchy just as women do. Only then will we collectively rally to dismantle patriarchy.”



**Have you seen any initiative that  
has had a positive impact on  
combatting the sexualisation of  
women in the workplace?**

# **Have you seen an initiative to have a positive impact?**

**65%** of total respondents reported that they have not seen any initiative that has made a positive impact on the issue. However there were some positive initiatives, a sample of which are shown overleaf.



# Examples of positive initiatives

Educating using  
videos during  
onboarding

Senior leadership  
not tolerating it  
in any form

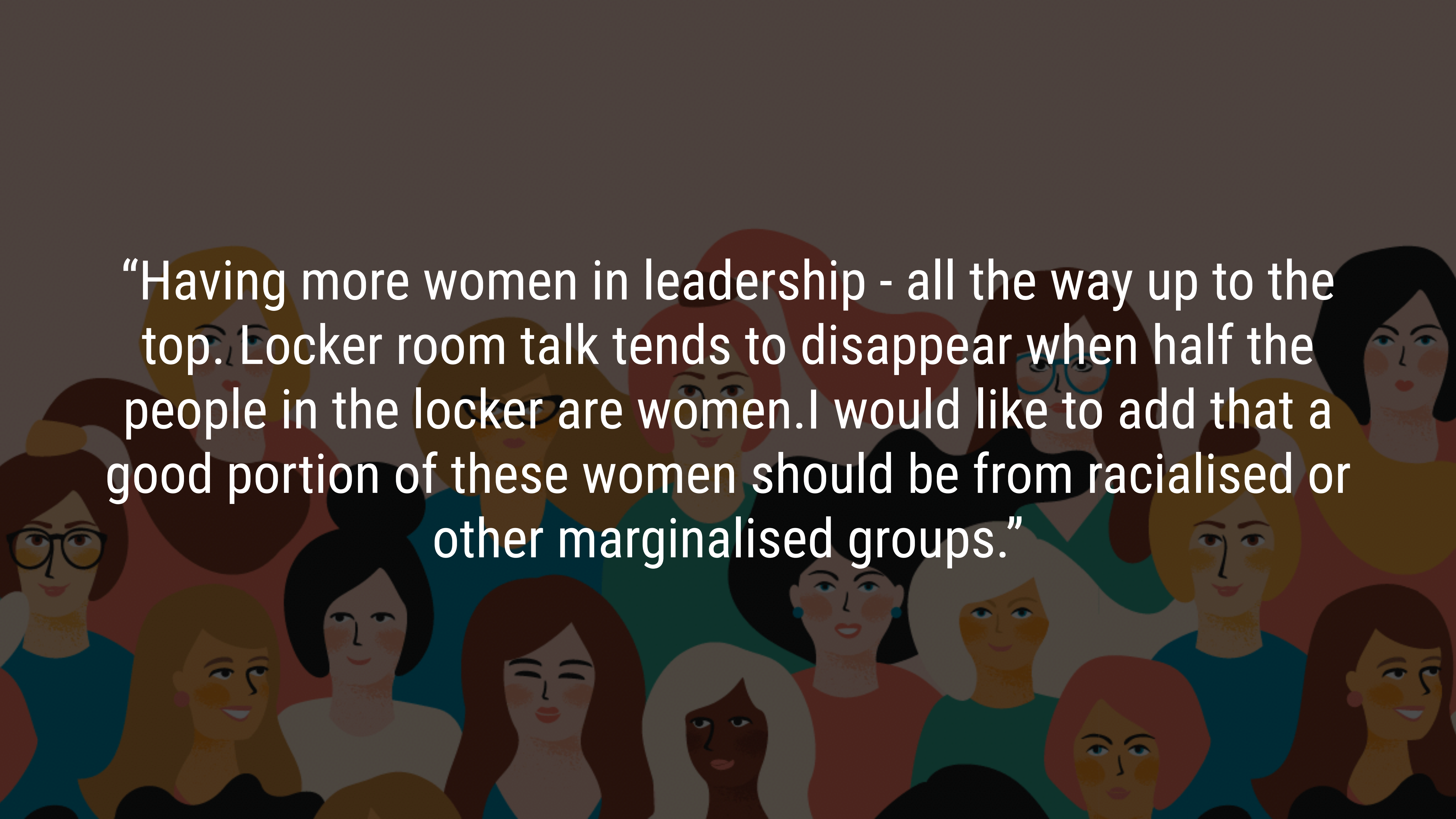
Women's network to  
build support and  
trust

Male Allyship

Whistleblowing  
platform to report  
bad behaviour

The activation of  
white middle aged  
men



A stylized illustration of a diverse group of women with various hair colors, styles, and skin tones, representing a multicultural and inclusive community. The women are depicted from the chest up, wearing simple, solid-colored tops. The background is a dark, muted color, making the lighter tones of the women's faces and hair stand out.

“Having more women in leadership - all the way up to the top. Locker room talk tends to disappear when half the people in the locker are women. I would like to add that a good portion of these women should be from racialised or other marginalised groups.”



**Do you have someone in your workplace whose inappropriate behaviour is known but tolerated (eg do you have someone who is known to be handsy)?**

**Do you have someone in the workplace whose inappropriate behaviour is known but tolerated?**

Yes

No

Prefer not to  
say

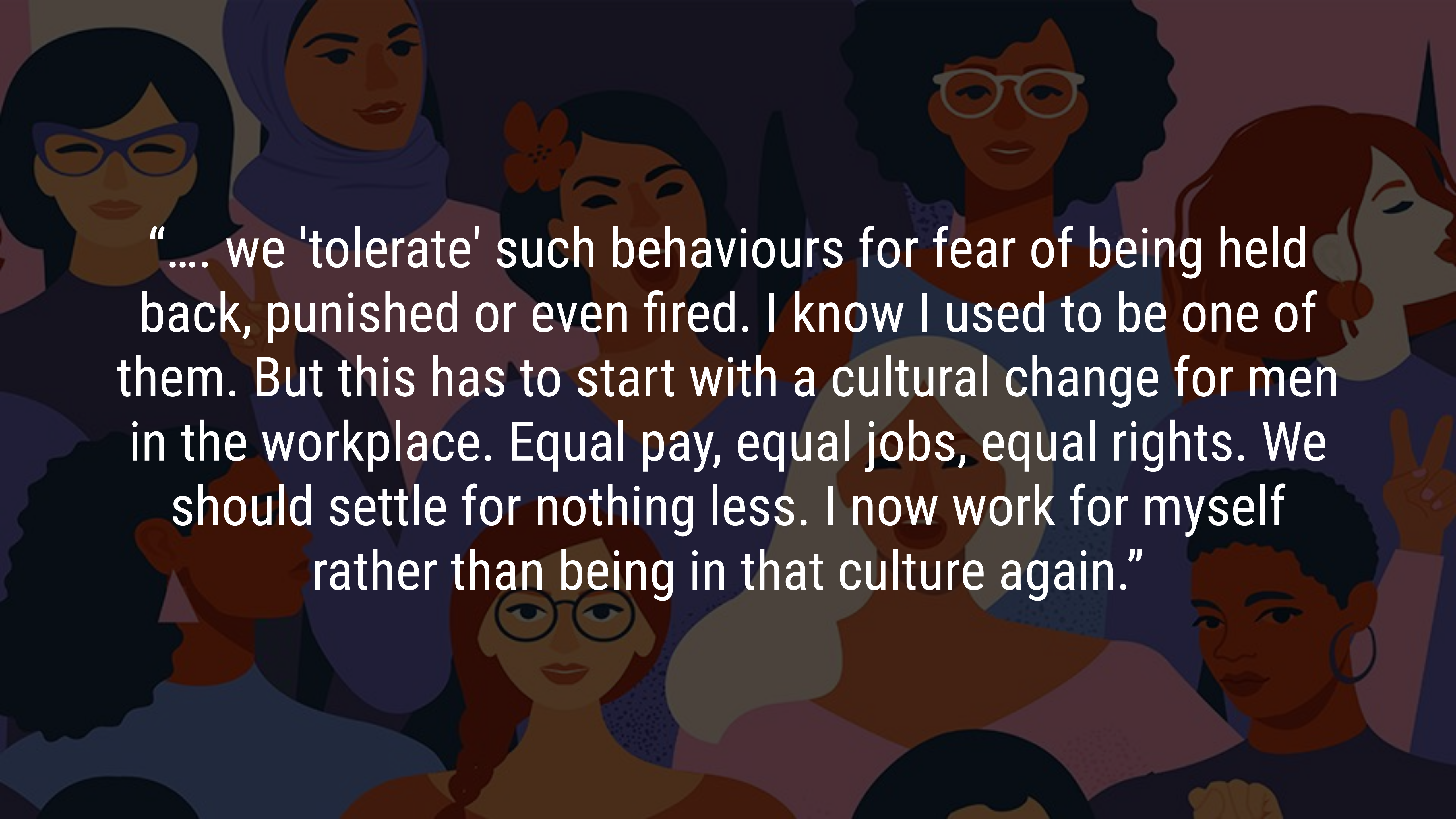
40%

56%

4%




**Other comments**

An illustration of a diverse group of women of various ethnicities and ages. Some are wearing headscarves, some have flowers in their hair, and some are wearing glasses. They are all looking towards the center where the text is located. The background is a dark, muted purple color.

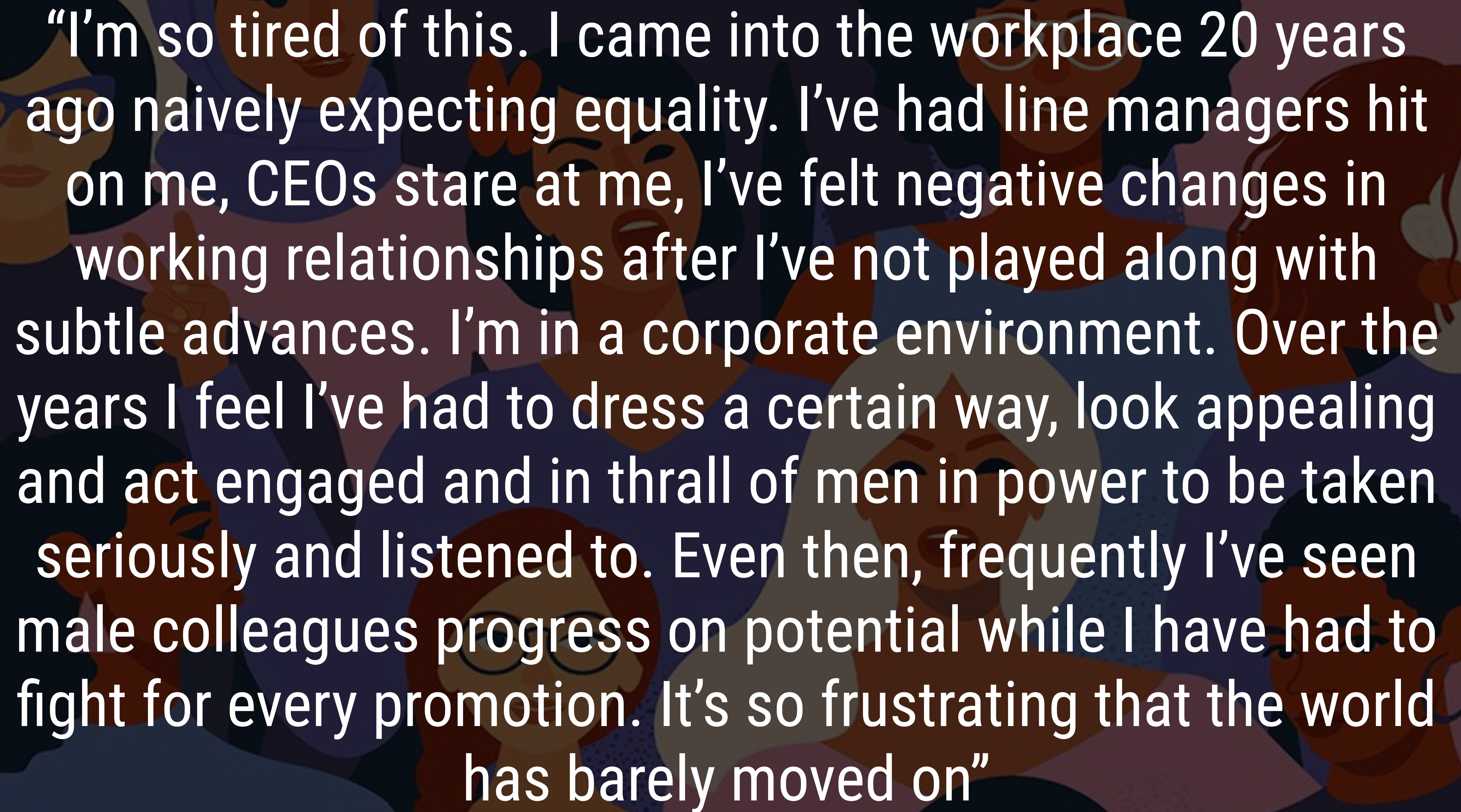
“.... we 'tolerate' such behaviours for fear of being held back, punished or even fired. I know I used to be one of them. But this has to start with a cultural change for men in the workplace. Equal pay, equal jobs, equal rights. We should settle for nothing less. I now work for myself rather than being in that culture again.”



An illustration of a diverse group of women of various ethnicities, ages, and styles, some with their hands raised in a gesture of participation or agreement. The background is a dark, muted purple and blue color.

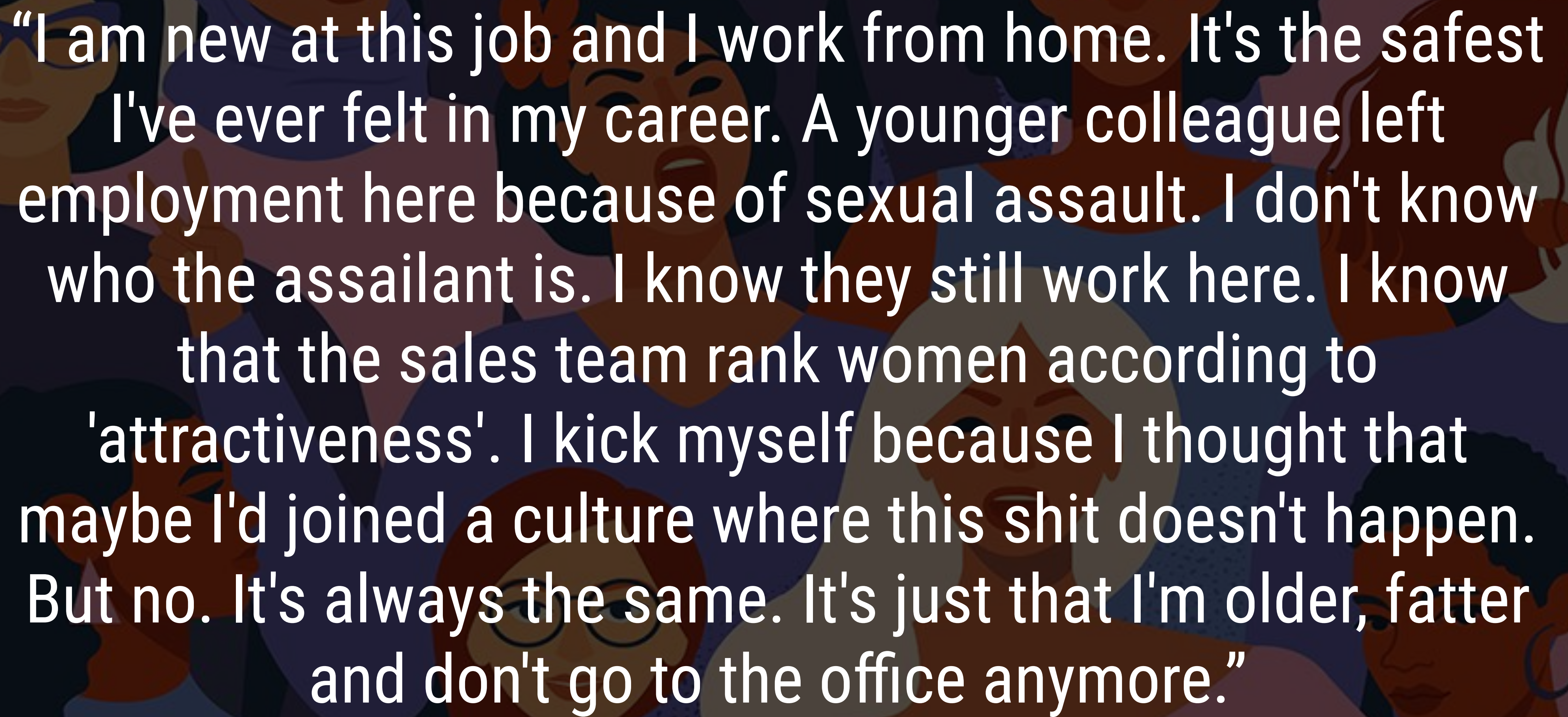
“For an office environment it's a culture change. There has to be a consistent message sent out as to what will and will not be tolerated. Also, please do not exclude those specifically impacted by the intersectionality of sexualisation in the workplace, for example, black women dealing with racist AND sexist behaviours directed towards them.”



An illustration of a diverse group of women in a meeting. The women are shown from the chest up, wearing various professional attire like blouses, sweaters, and a hijab. They have different hair colors and styles, and some are wearing glasses. The background is a dark, muted color with a pattern of overlapping circles and shapes in shades of purple, blue, and brown. The text is overlaid on the illustration in a white, sans-serif font.

“I’m so tired of this. I came into the workplace 20 years ago naively expecting equality. I’ve had line managers hit on me, CEOs stare at me, I’ve felt negative changes in working relationships after I’ve not played along with subtle advances. I’m in a corporate environment. Over the years I feel I’ve had to dress a certain way, look appealing and act engaged and in thrall of men in power to be taken seriously and listened to. Even then, frequently I’ve seen male colleagues progress on potential while I have had to fight for every promotion. It’s so frustrating that the world has barely moved on”



A stylized illustration of a diverse group of women of various ethnicities and ages. Some are wearing headscarves, some have glasses, and some are making hand gestures. The background is a dark, muted color with the women's faces and hair rendered in lighter, flat colors.

“I am new at this job and I work from home. It's the safest I've ever felt in my career. A younger colleague left employment here because of sexual assault. I don't know who the assailant is. I know they still work here. I know that the sales team rank women according to 'attractiveness'. I kick myself because I thought that maybe I'd joined a culture where this shit doesn't happen. But no. It's always the same. It's just that I'm older, fatter and don't go to the office anymore.”



An illustration of a diverse group of women of various ethnicities and ages. Some are wearing hijabs, some have flowers in their hair, and some are wearing glasses. They are shown in various poses, some with their mouths open as if speaking or shouting, and some making hand gestures like the peace sign. The background is a dark, muted purple color.

“Fighting it is exhausting”



# Creating Change

# Examples of interventions

Create safe spaces  
for women

Implement a whistle  
blowing platform

Create a code of  
conduct for events  
and social  
gatherings

Run Listening  
Circles for female  
employees

Create a Male  
Allies Group

Deliver mandatory  
training for everyone



# Combatting Sexualisation in the Workplace

We have also designed a two-hour workshop for companies interested in genuinely tackling this issue. The workshop will help participants to recognise sexualisation and cultural norms that contribute to it in the workplace; identify strategies to support those who are impacted; call out bad behaviour and open up a discussion about creating meaningful cultural change.

Expect everyone to come away with a better understanding, a mindset shift around what is and what isn't acceptable so they can be better allies and feel more confident in tackling incidences in the future and key actions they can make tomorrow that will immediately have a positive impact.

# Contact

If you are interested in us coming in to support you in combatting the sexualisation of women in the workplace or on your wider I&D strategy, please do get in contact:



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