Sexualisation of Women in the Workplace research

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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

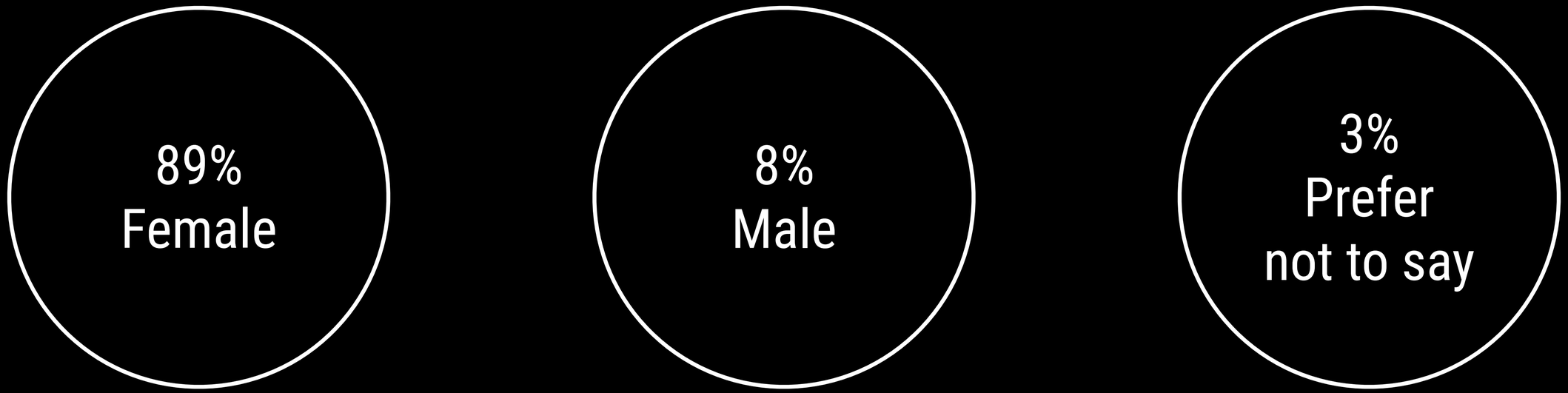
Companies where women are sexualised are likely to face a negative impact on their client and staff retention and attraction, on creativity, productivity, team cohesion, culture, performance and ultimately, their overall success

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.

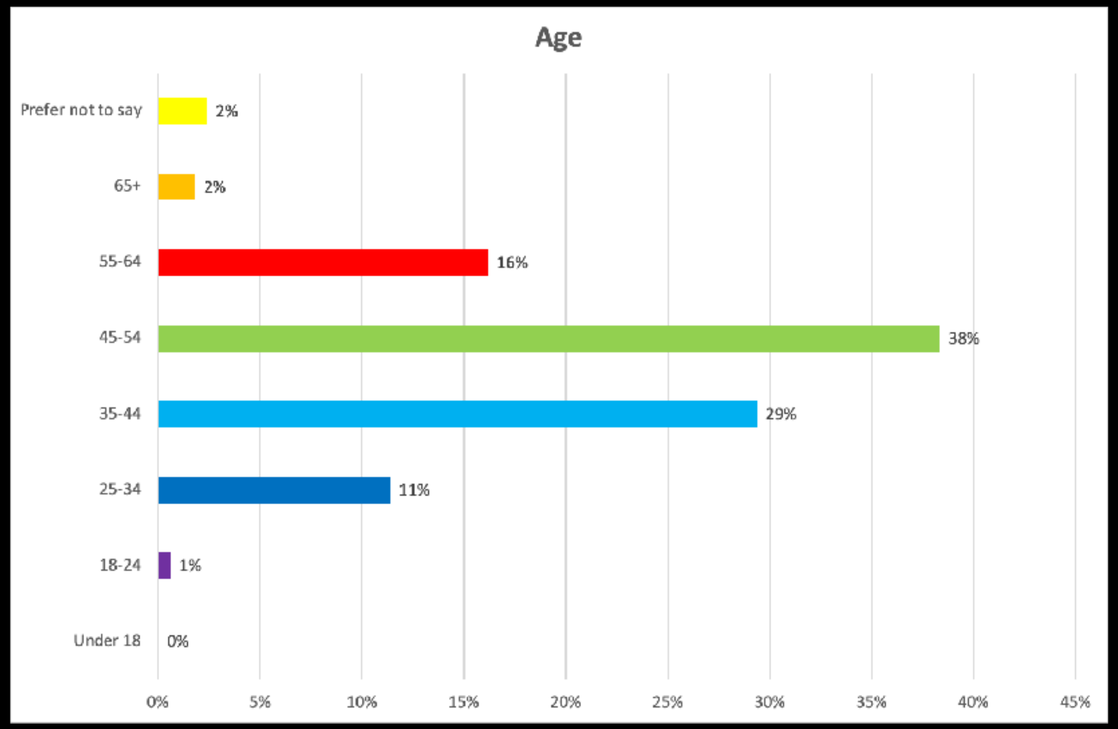
Our respondents

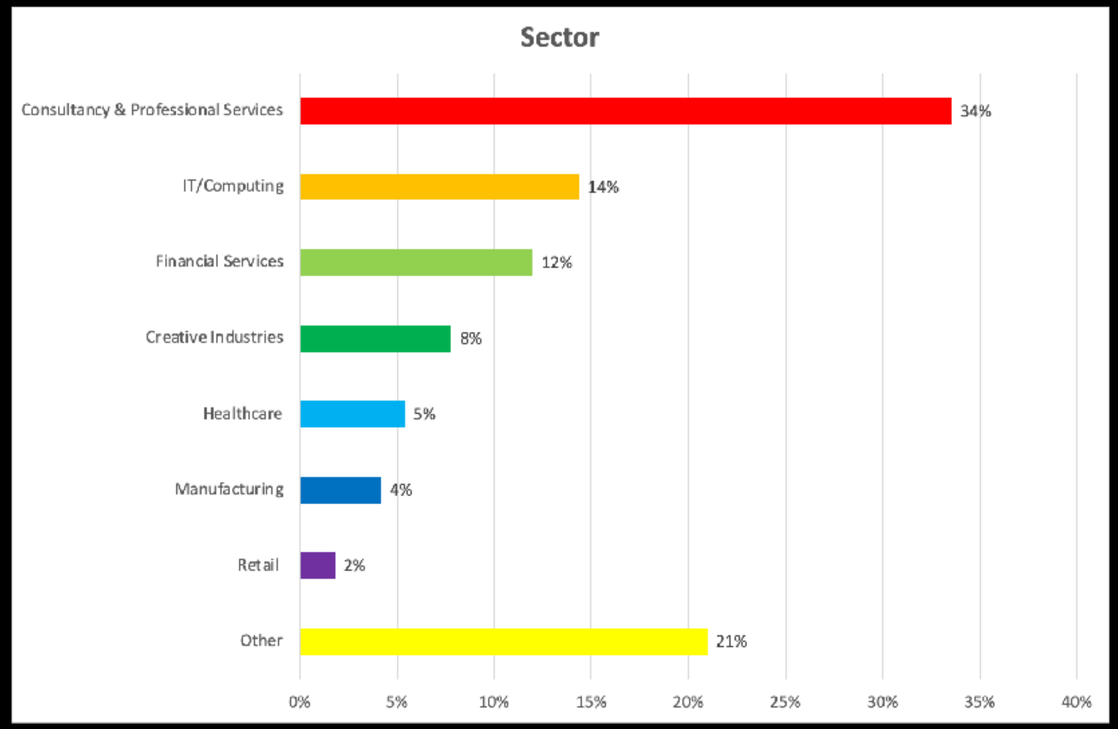
Our respondents*



*Sample size: Over 150 respondents

Our respondents





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 .

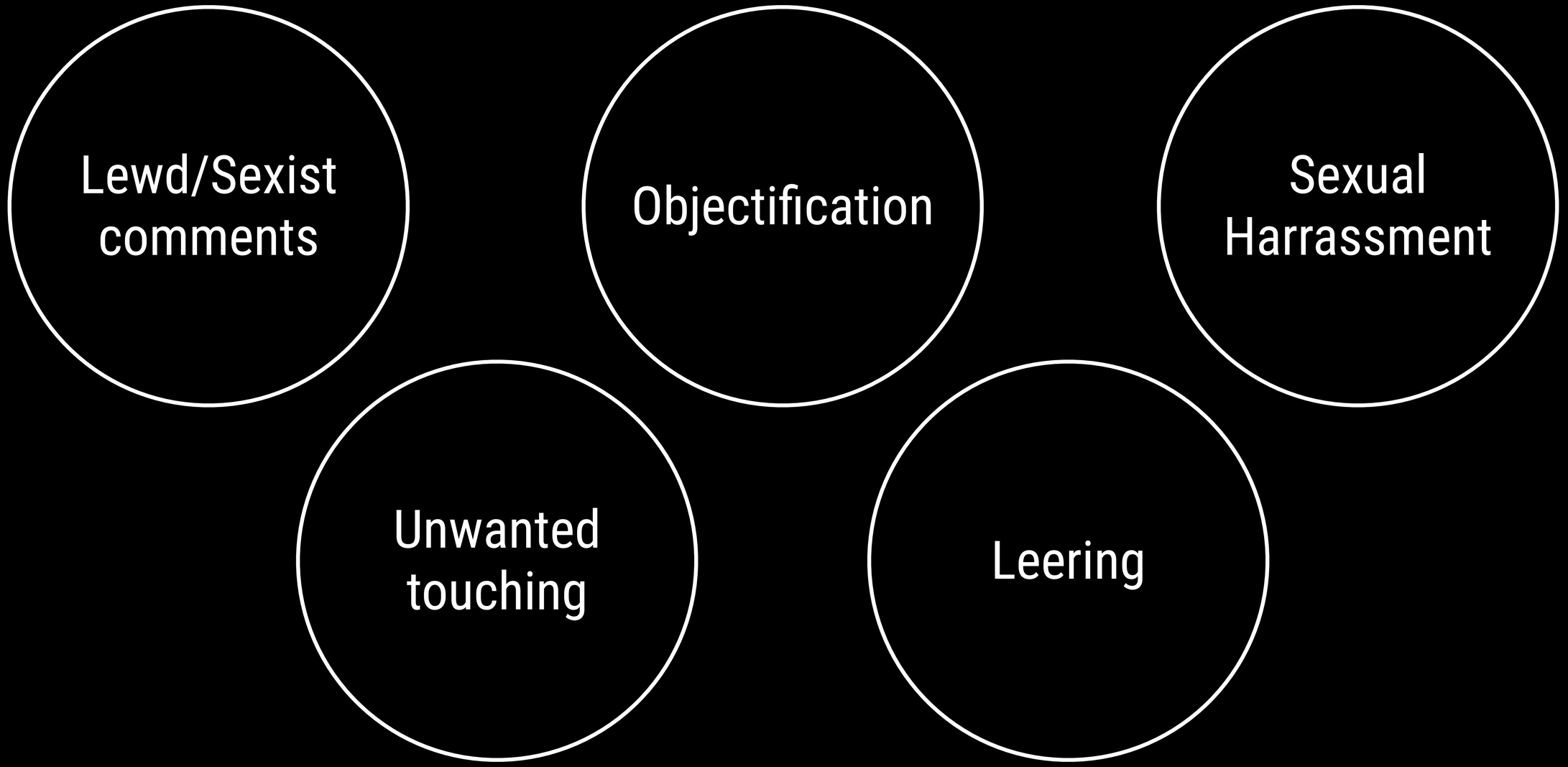
Survey results

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

Yes	No	Unsure
55%	32%	23%

If so, what did it involve

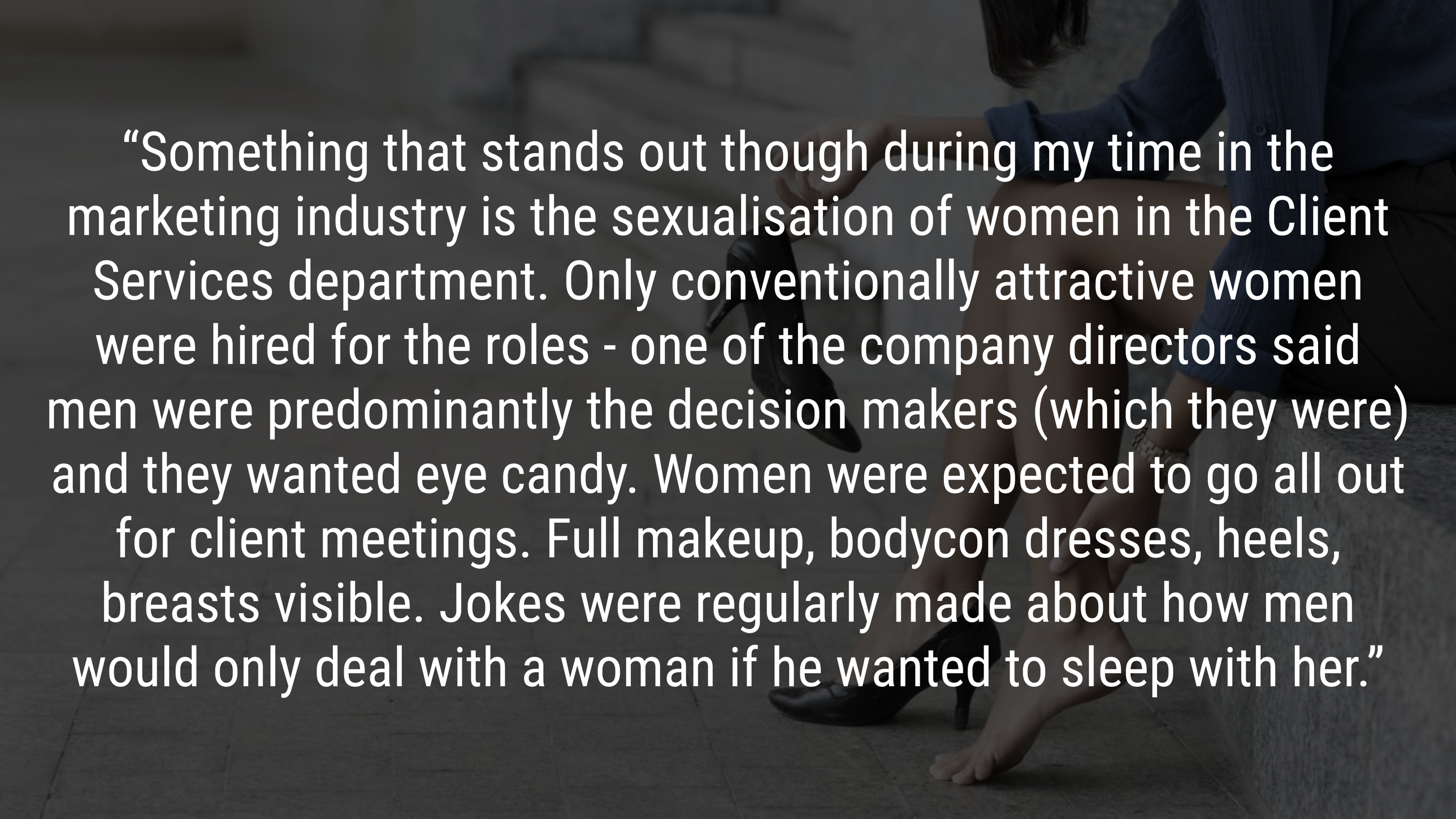
Themes



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

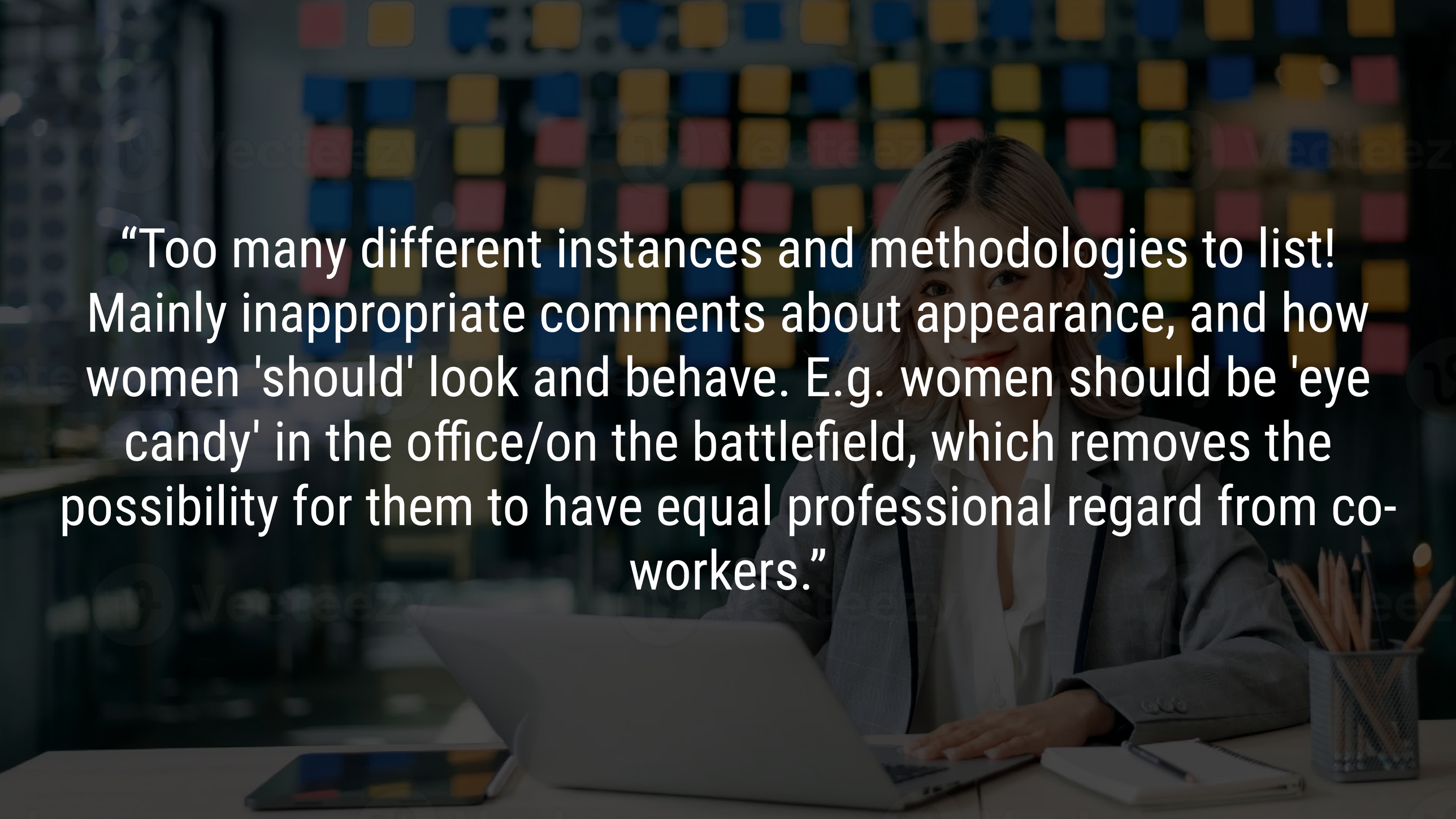
“So many, many incidents over the years - it has affected how I conduct myself at work, my confidence levels, my ability to progress… A few examples include: Unwanted sexts and subsequent threats of being fired if I told anyone. This then played out into not being fairly treated when promotions or pay 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.”

“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.”



“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.”



“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

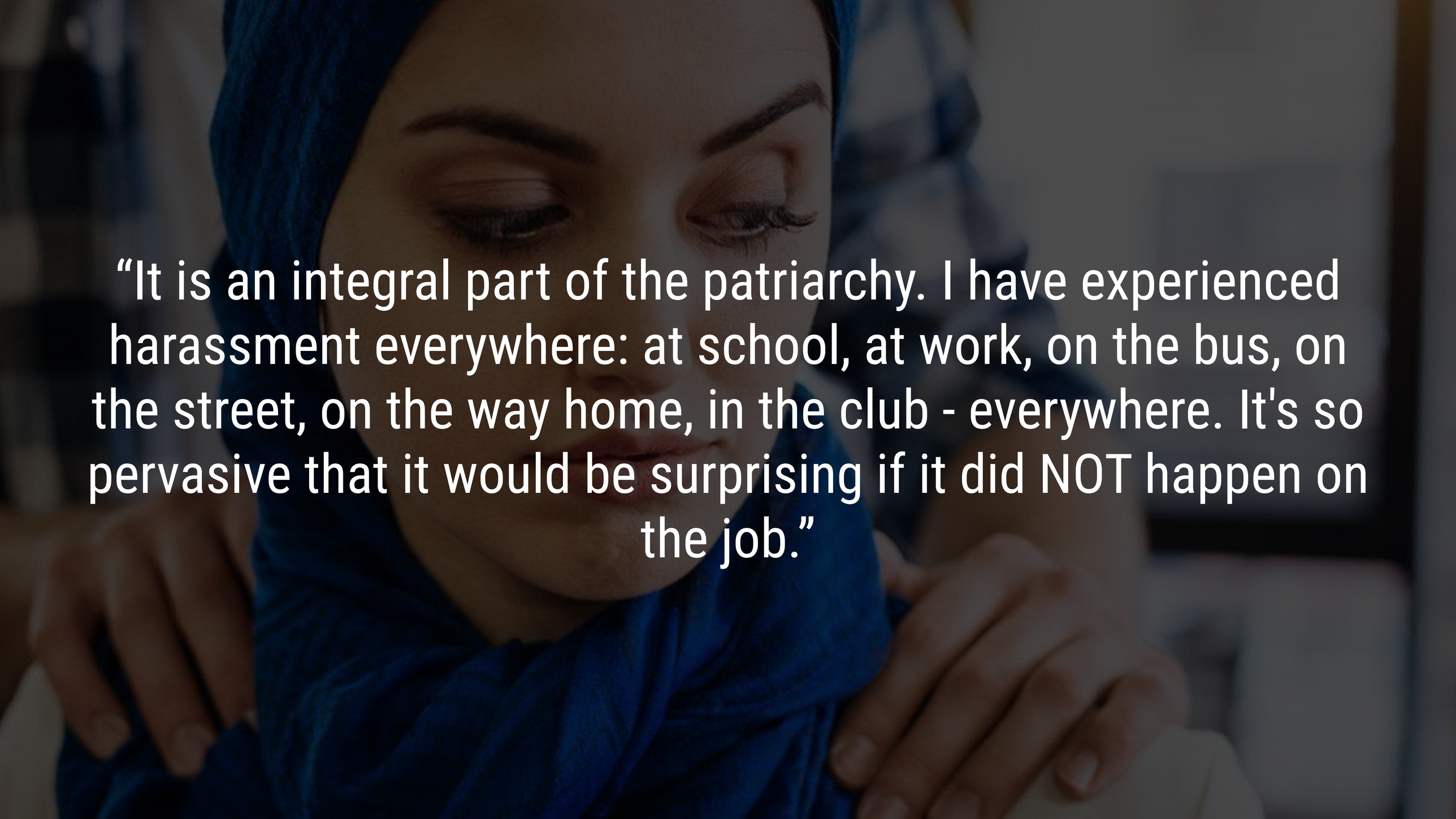
Societal Norms

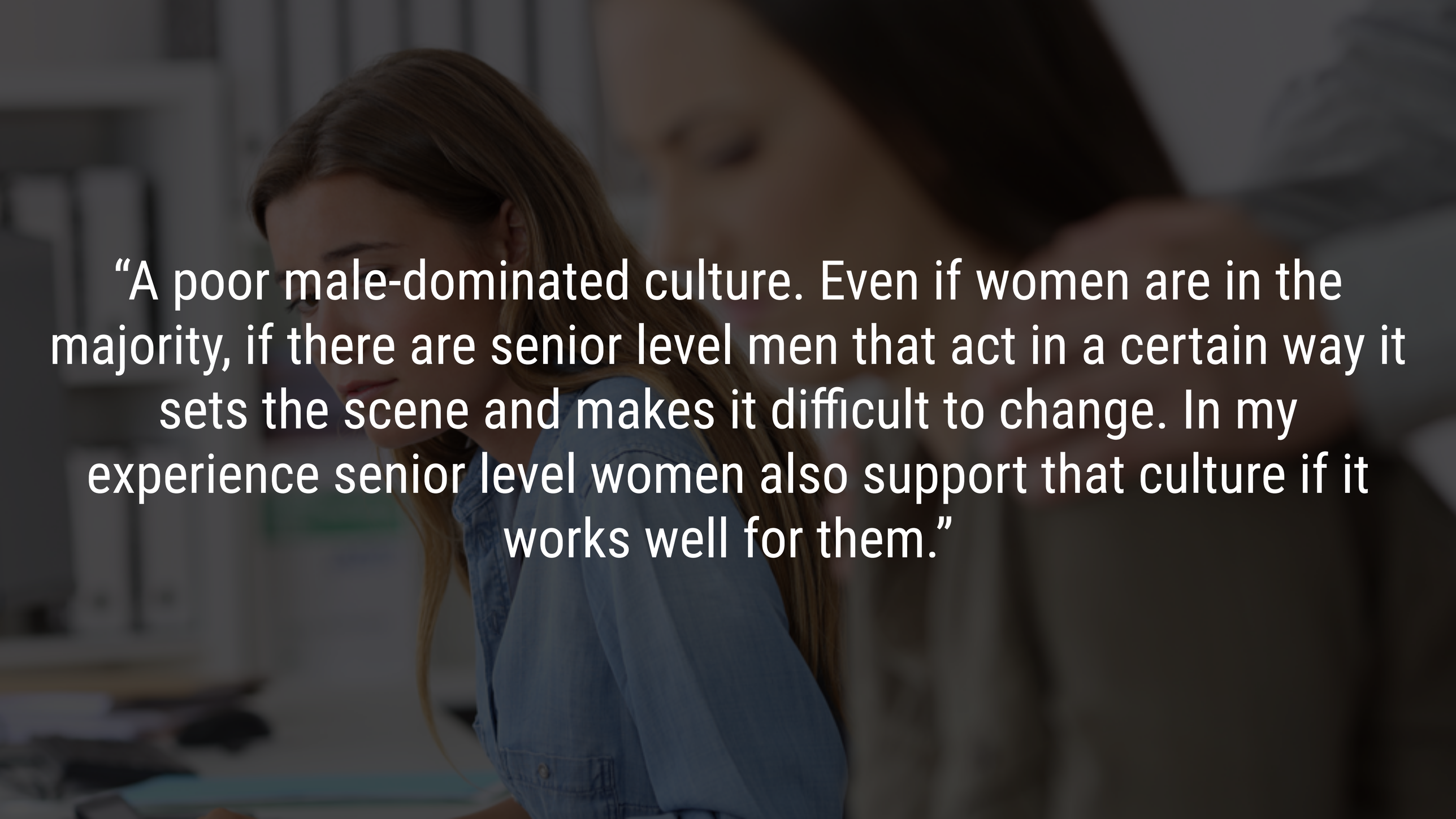
Underlying culture/ Banter

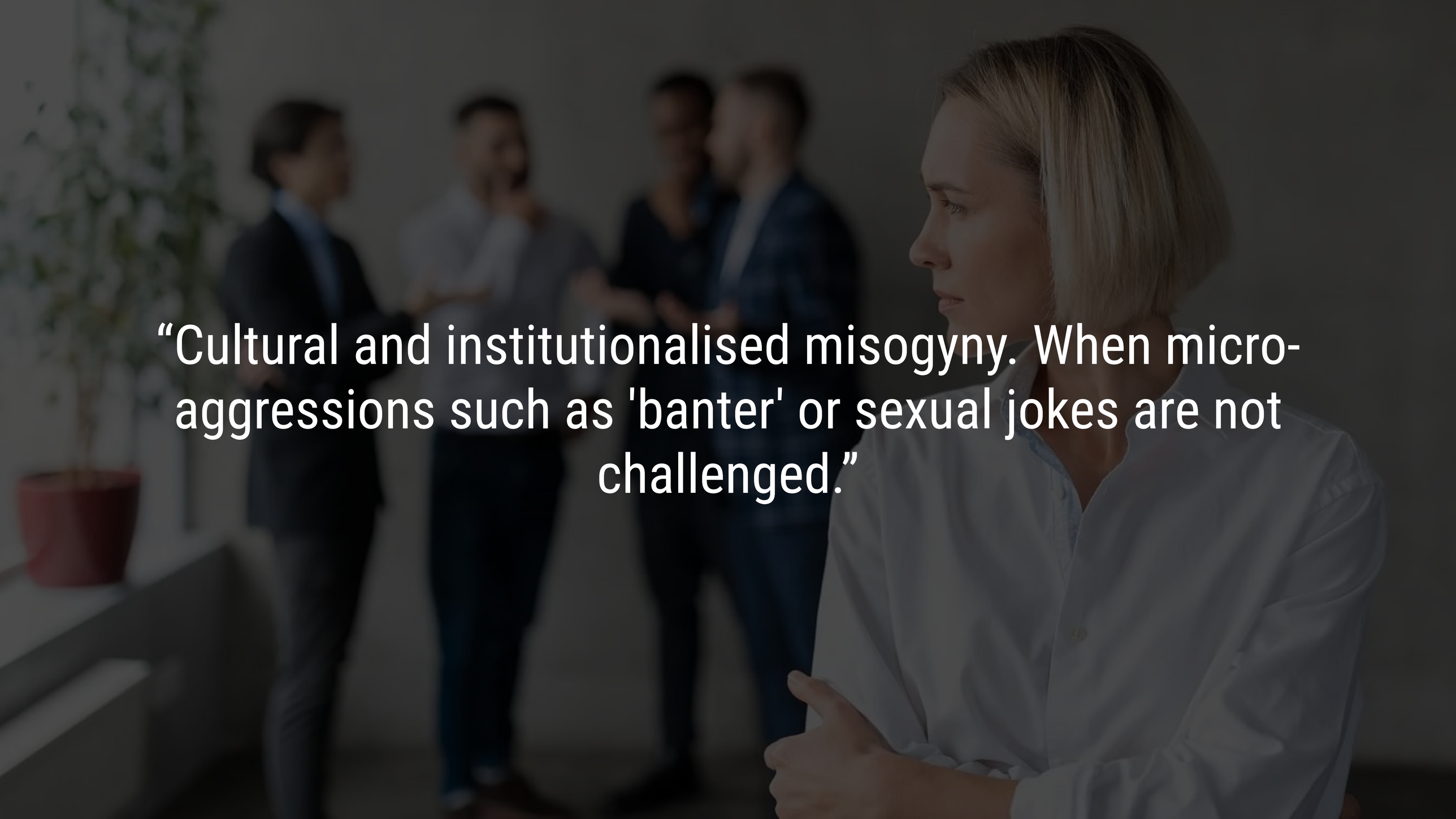
Men’s Entitlement/ Power Dyamics

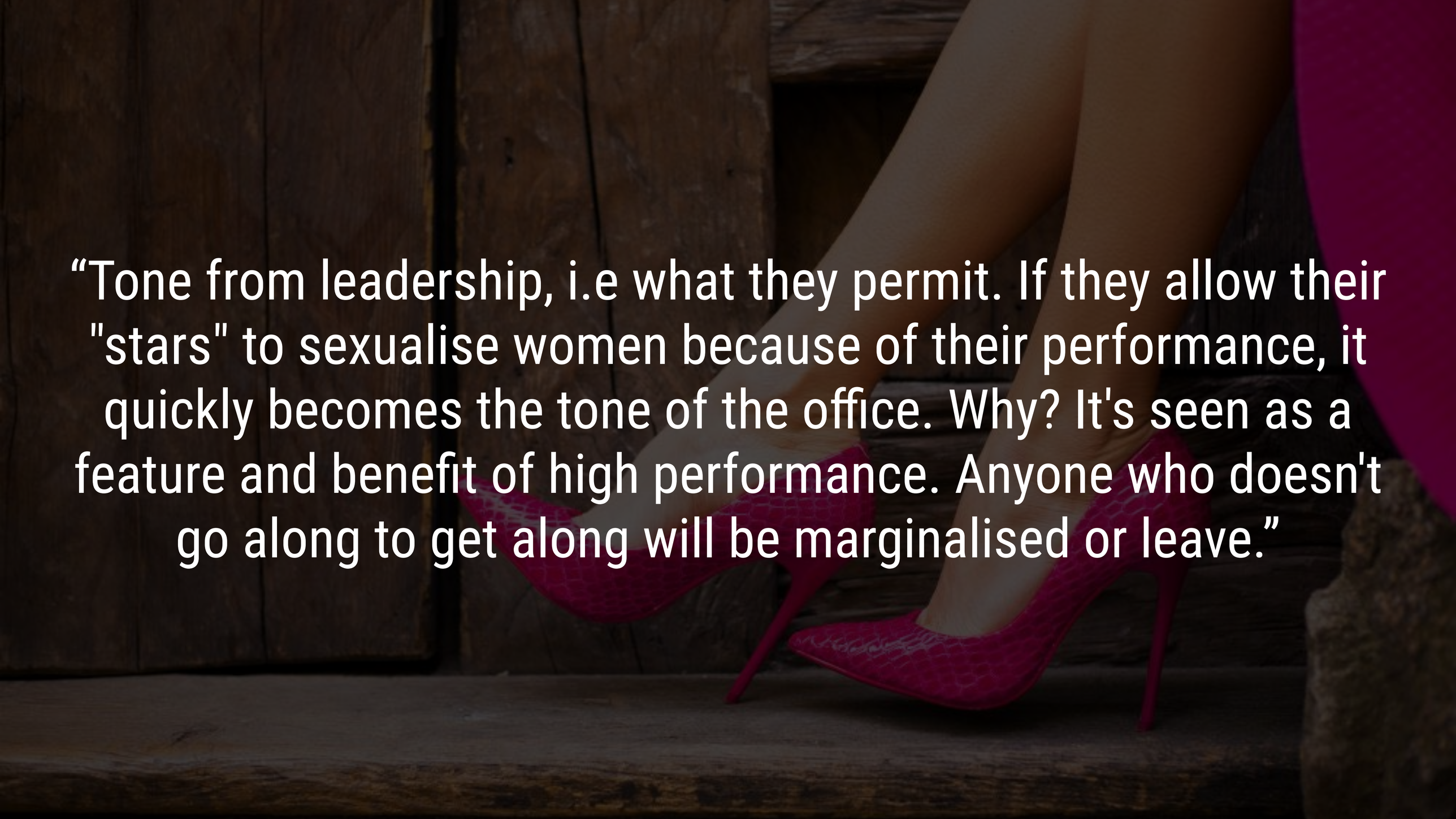
Men’s ignorance/ Outdated attitude

Misogyny

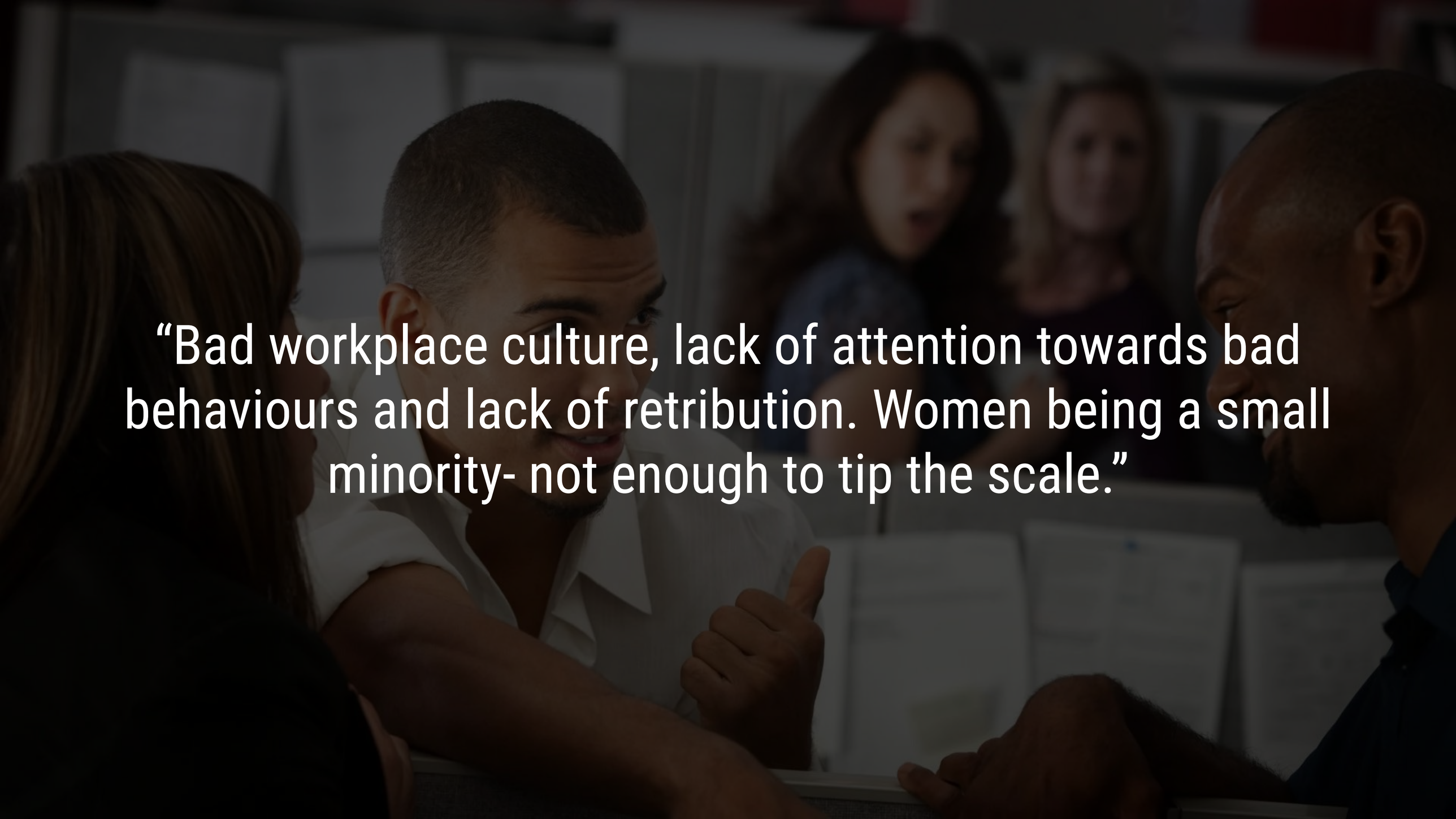

“It is an integral part of the patriarchy. I have experienced harassment everywhere: at school, at work, on the bus, on the street, on the way home, in the club - everywhere. It's so pervasive that it would be surprising if it did NOT happen on the job.”

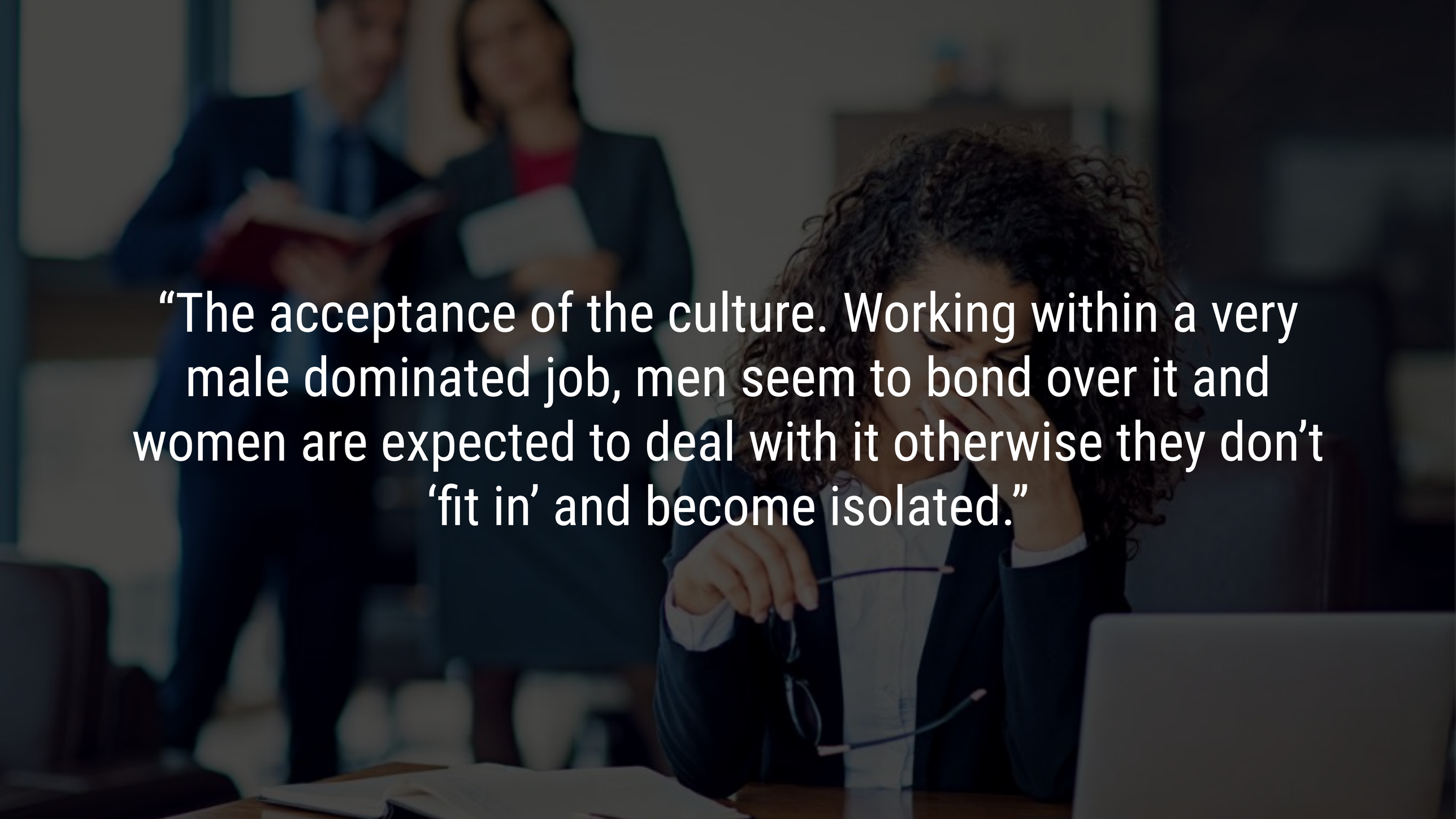

“A poor male-dominated culture. Even if women are in the majority, if there are senior level men that act in a certain way it sets the scene and makes it difficult to change. In my experience senior level women also support that culture if it works well for them.”


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



“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.”


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


“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 sexualistion of women in the workplace?

Key changes

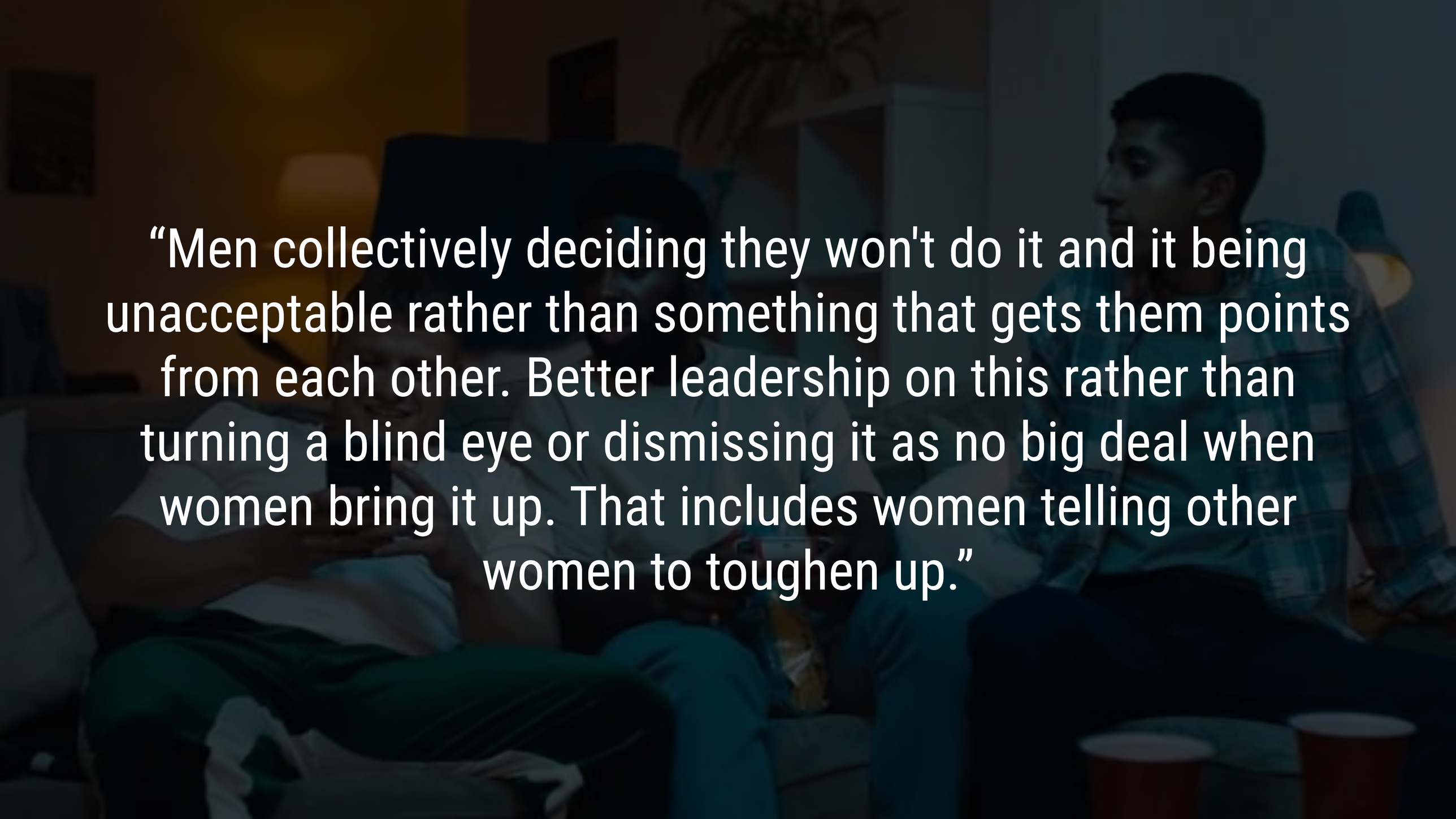
Management take it seriously: effective grievance

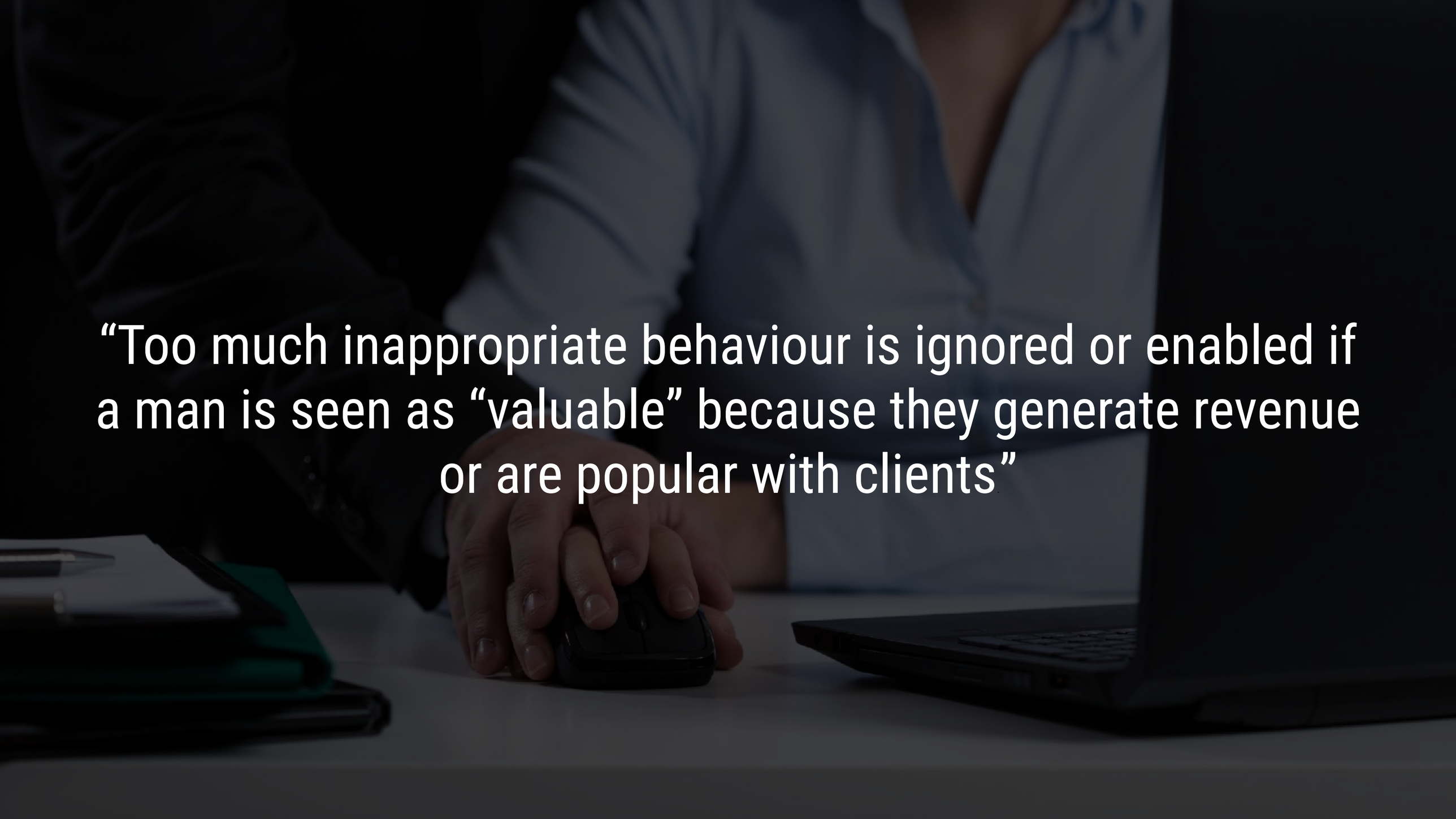
Open your eyes! Accept this is a real issue

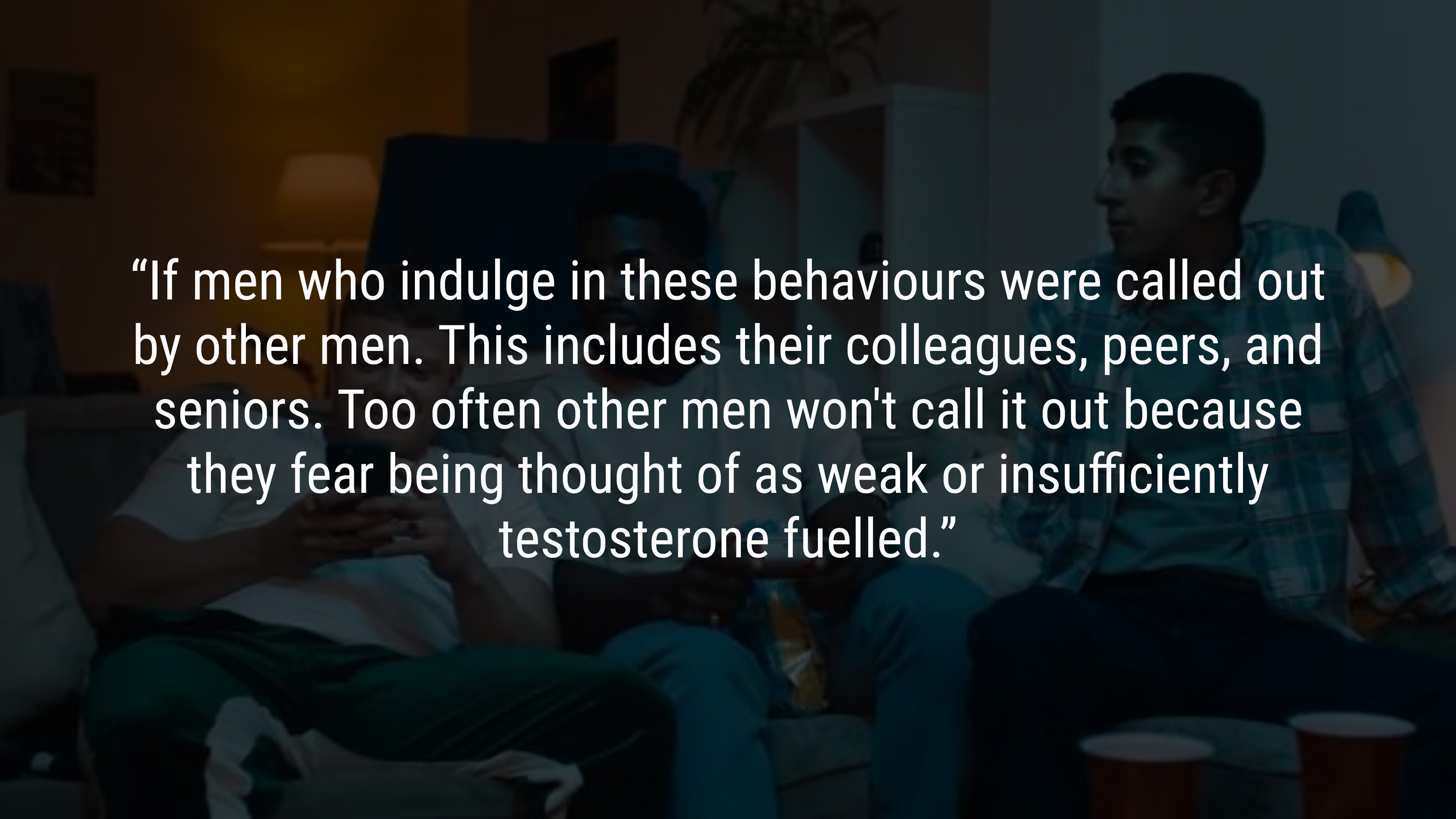
More women, especially at the top

Stop victim blaming women and properly educate men

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


“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.”


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


“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.”

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

“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

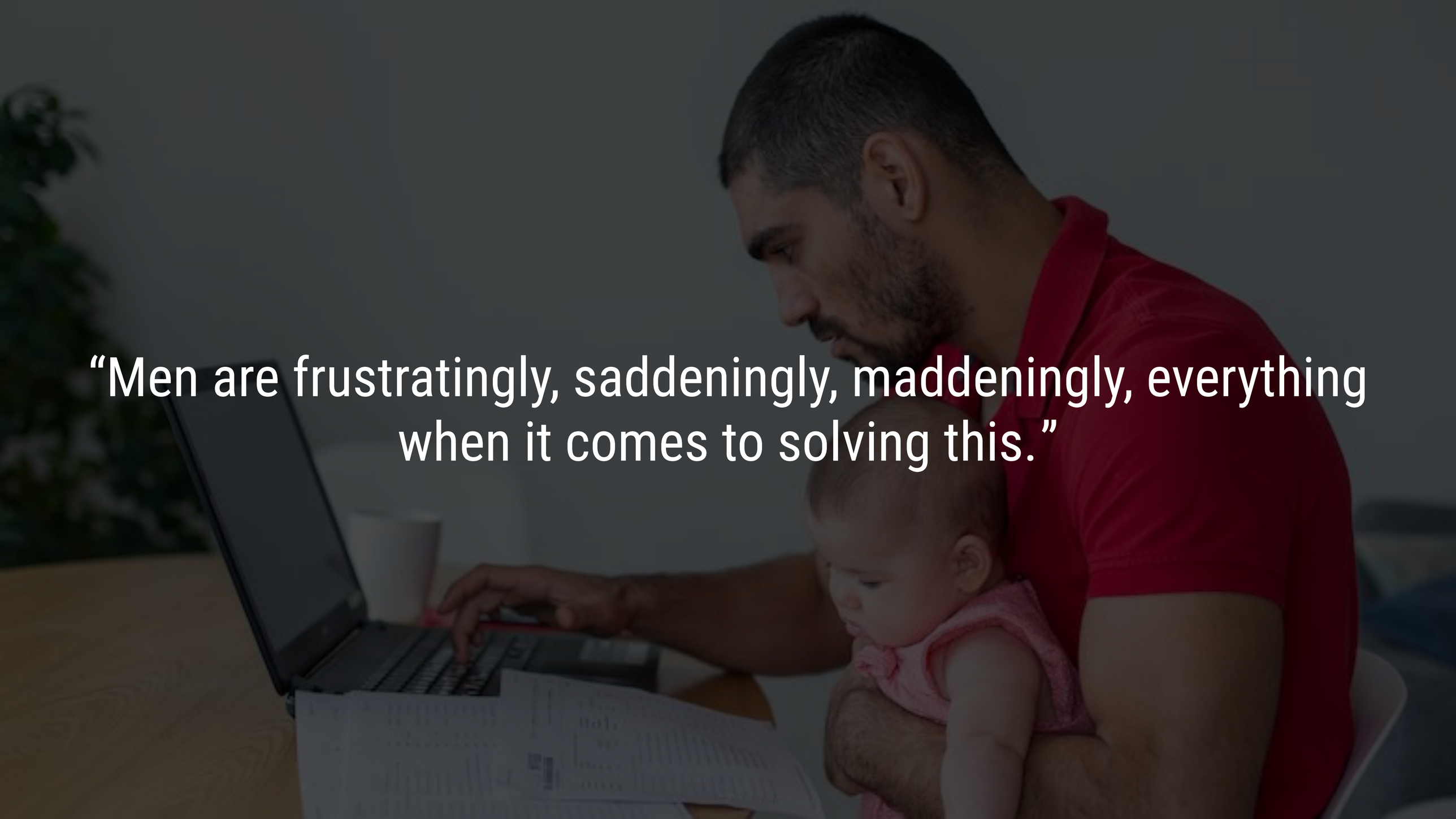
Take women's complaints seriously

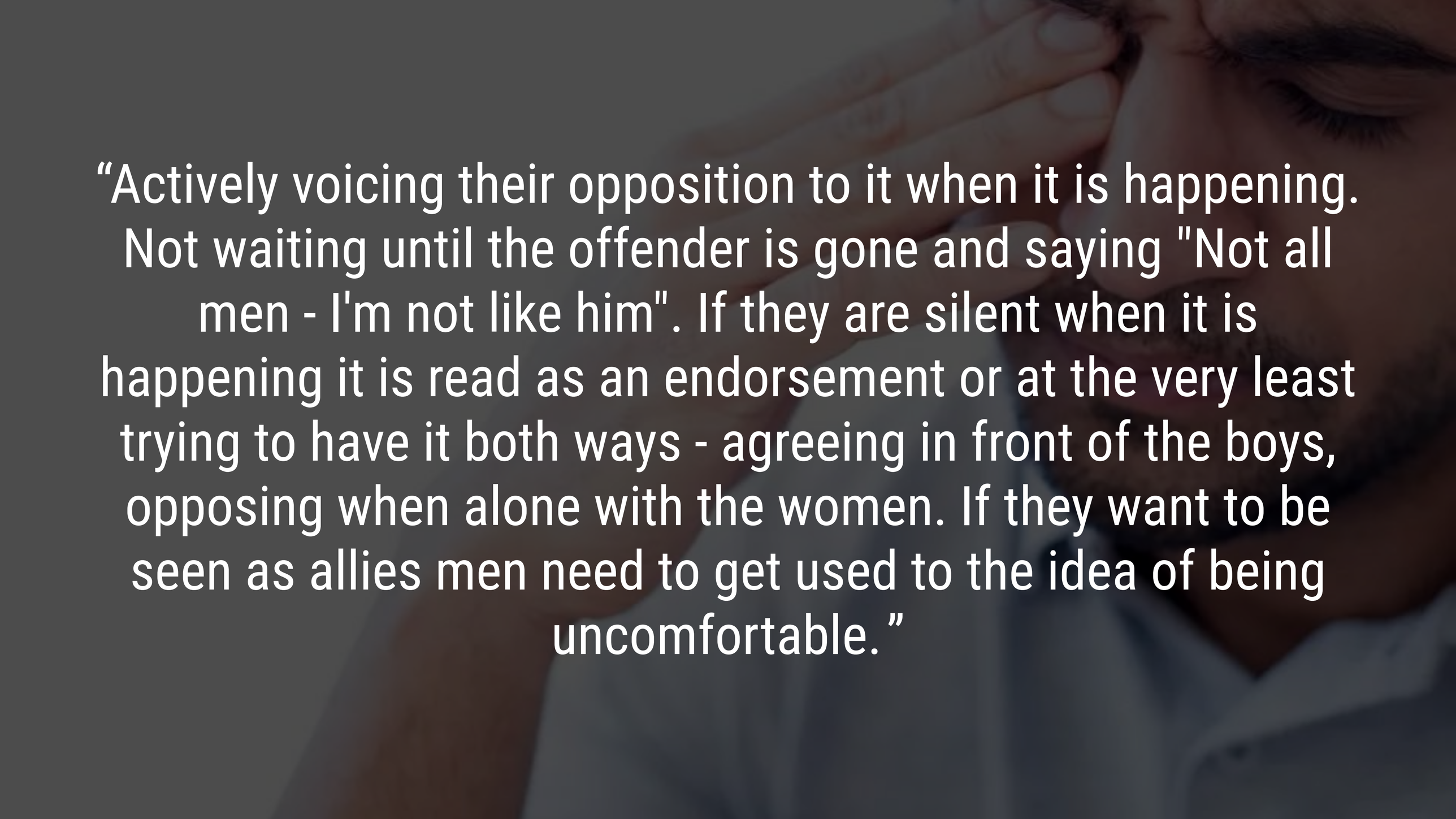
Call out other men, especially if women aren't present

Support other men who speak up

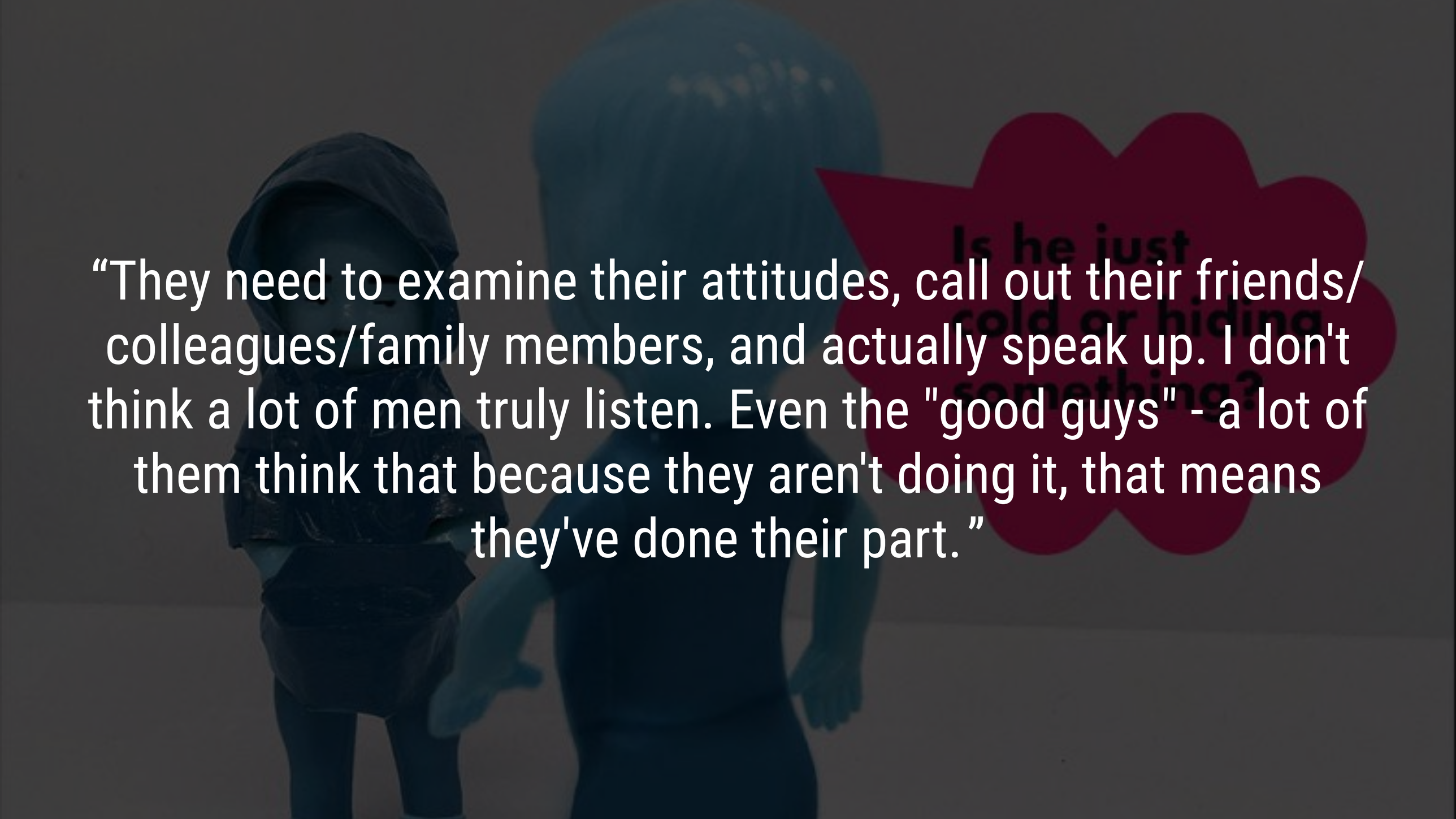
Education: children, teenagers, grown men

“Be champions, not predators.”

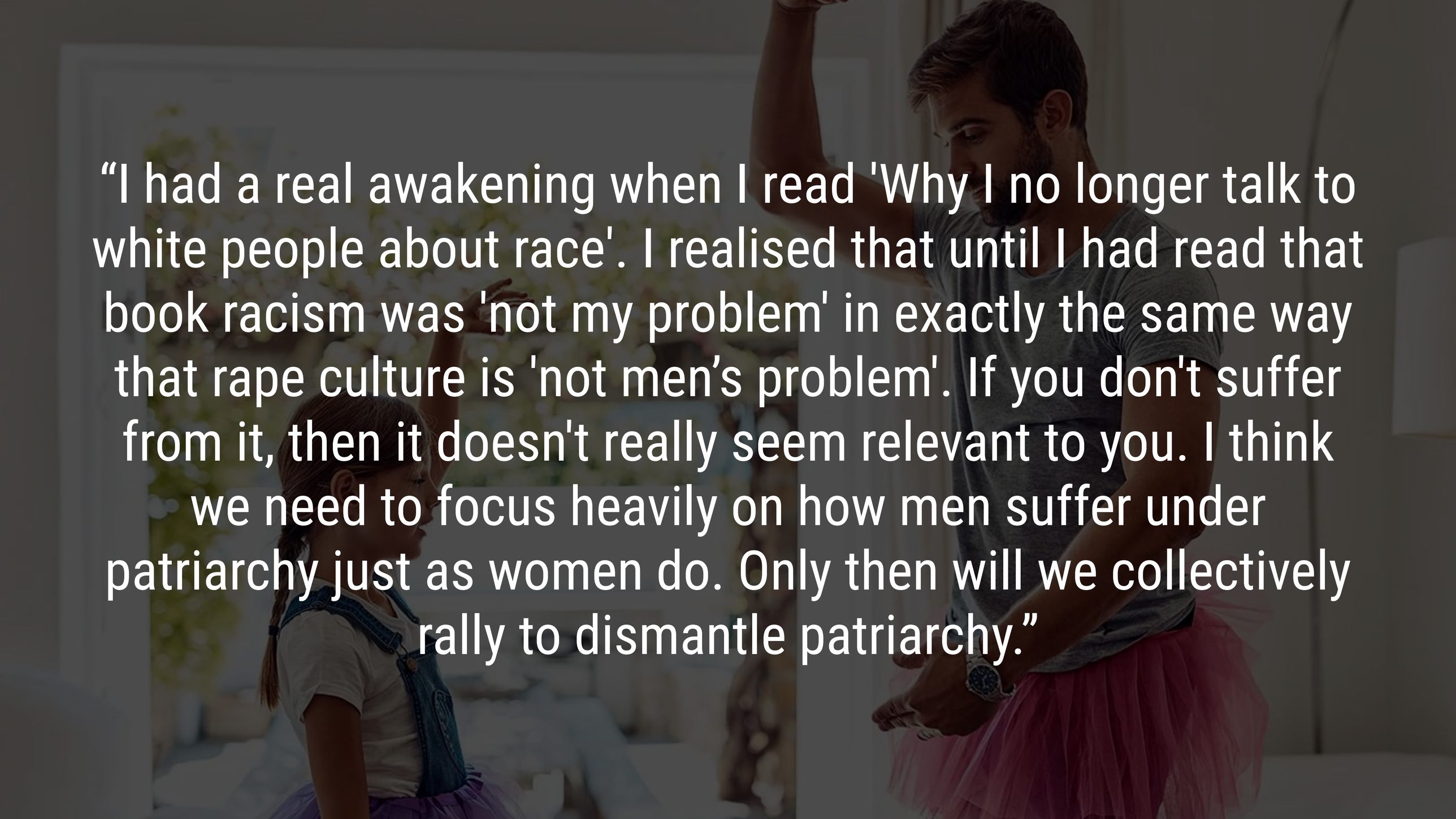

“Men are frustratingly, saddeningly, maddeningly, everything when it comes to solving this.”



“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.”



“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

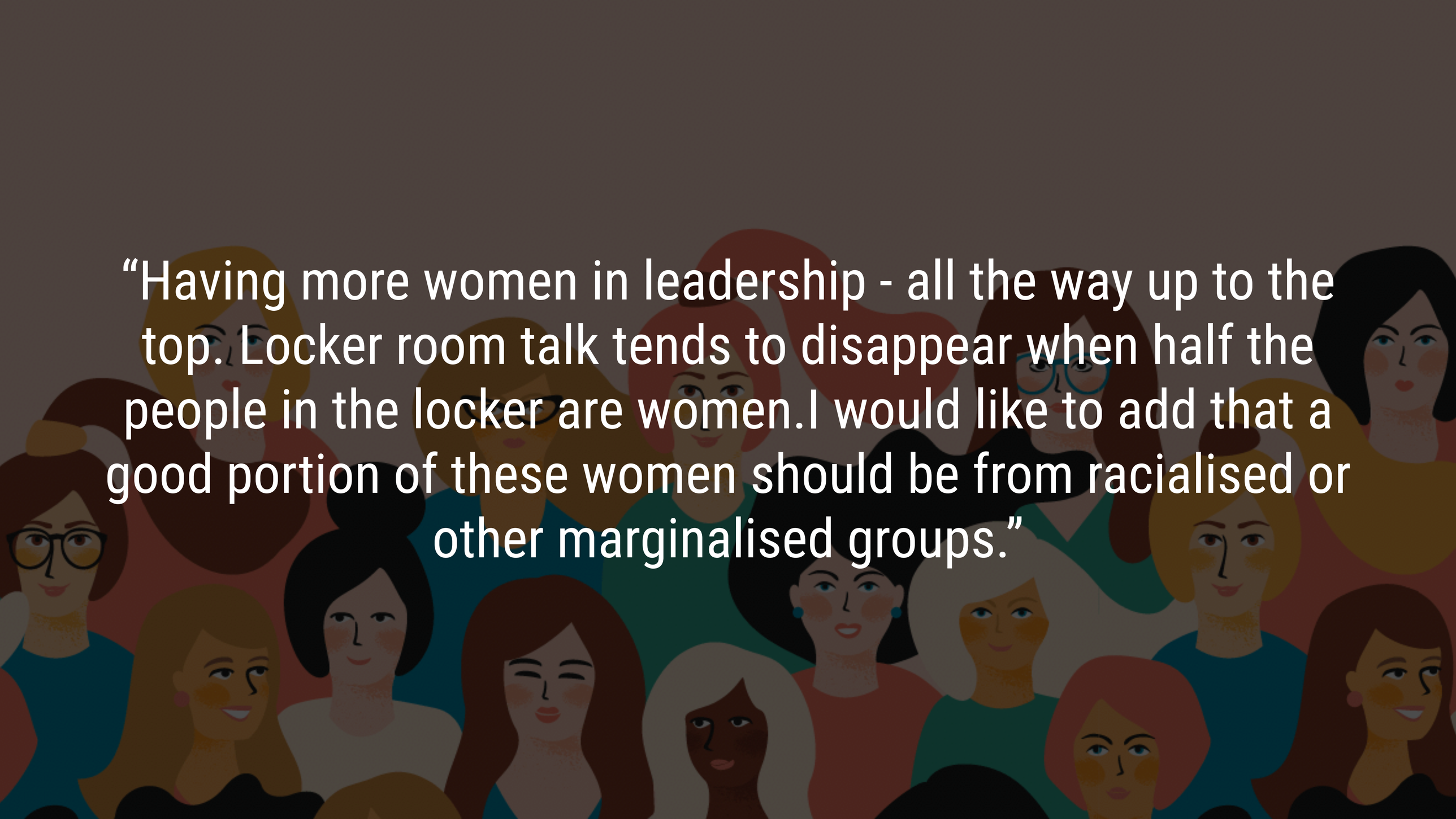
Senior leadership not tolerating it in any form

Women’s network to build support and trust

Male Allyship

Whistleblowing platform to report bad behaviour

The activation of white middle aged men

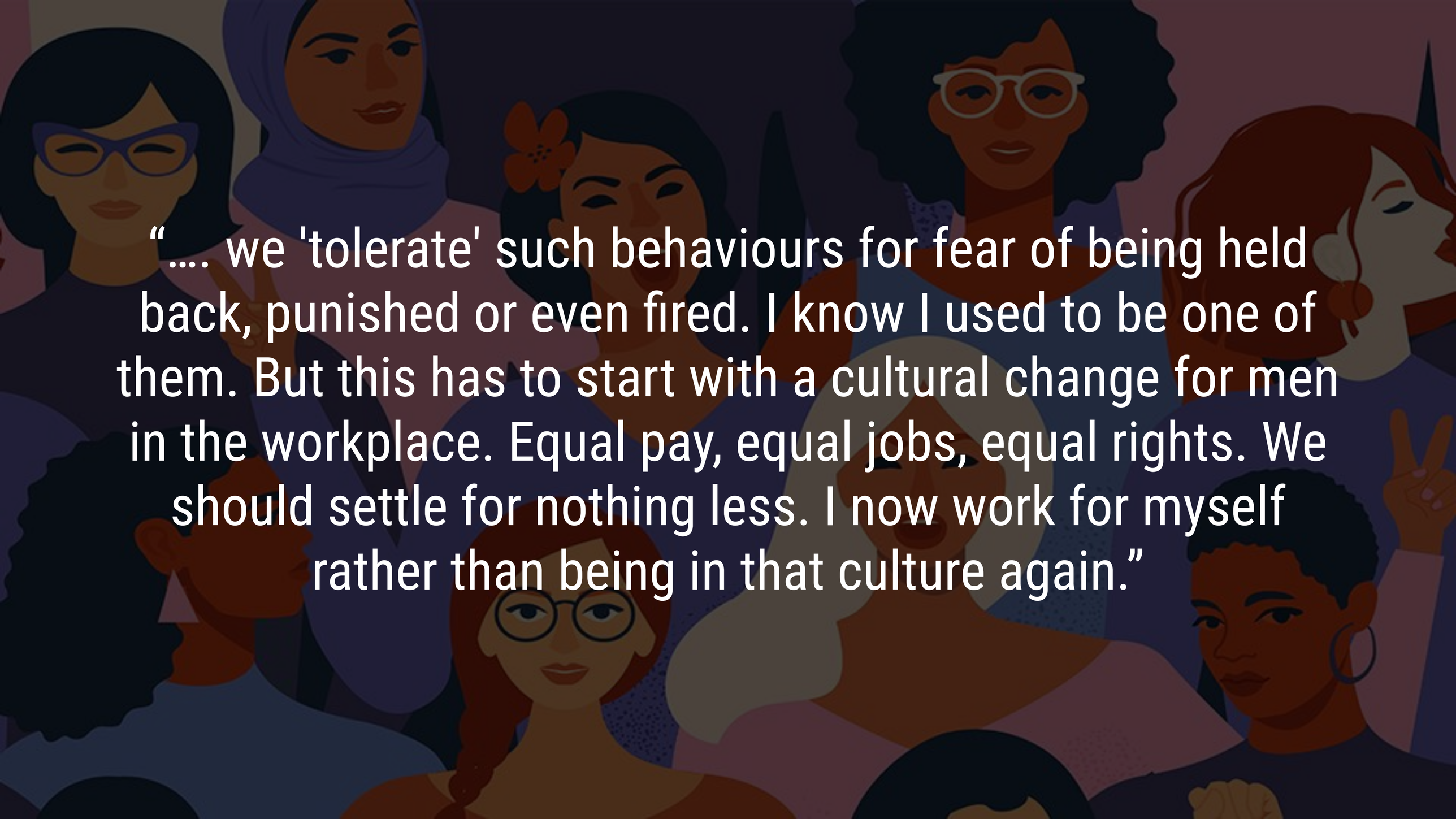

“Having more women in leadership - all the way up to the top. Locker room talk tends to disappear when half the people in the locker are women.I would like to add that a good portion of these women should be from racialised or other marginalised groups.”

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)?

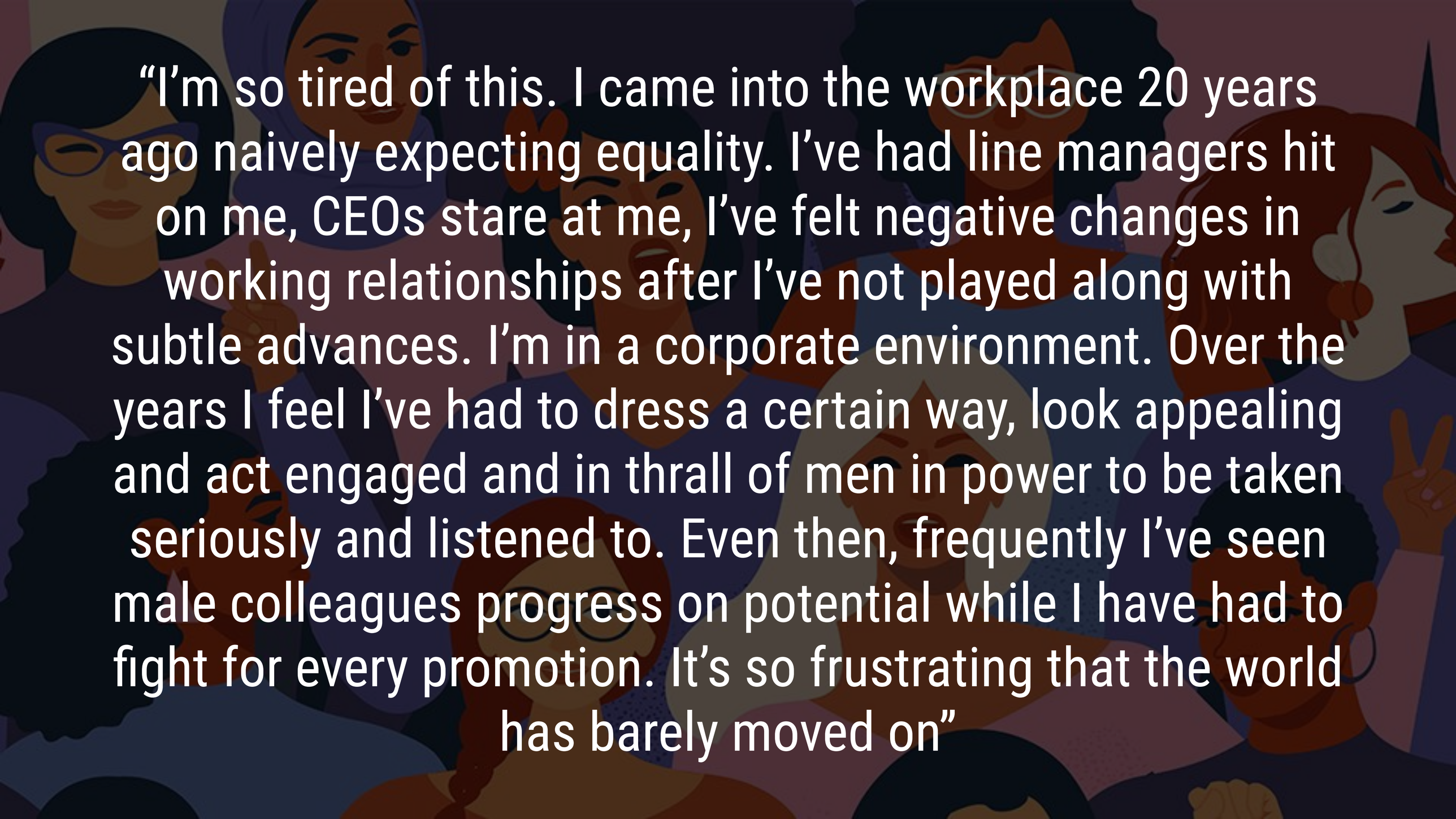
Do you have someone in the workplace whose inappropriate behaviour is known but tolerated?

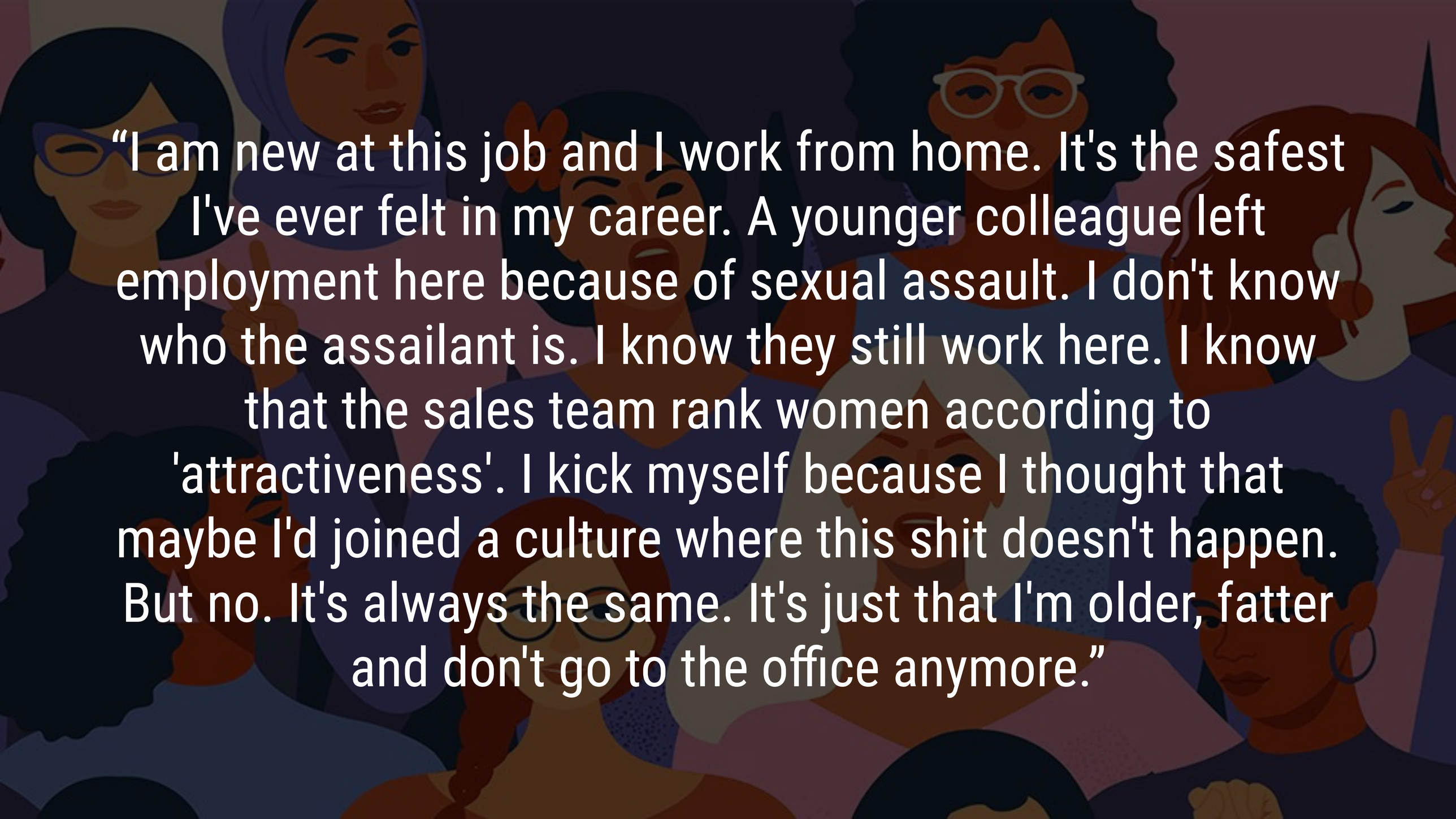
Yes	No	Prefer not to say
40%	56%	4%

Other comments


“…. 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.”

“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.”


“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”


“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.”

“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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