Workplace sexual harassment on the big screen: what can we learn from the Bridget Jones movies?

Bridget Jones: Mad About the Boy **has reignited love for the** ***Bridget Jones*** **films, but rewatching the series, you cannot help but notice that the behaviour in Bridget's workplaces has not aged as well as her fondness for Chardonnay. In this article, we consider the examples of workplace sexual harassment in the movies and the learning points for today's employer.**

What conduct are we talking about?

In the *Bridget Jones* films, there are many instances of Bridget's boss, Daniel Cleaver – played by Hugh Grant – engaging in sexually inappropriate behaviour. In the first film in the series (released in 2001), *Bridget Jones's Diary*, Daniel makes a comment on the length of Bridget's skirt when he sends an email to her which says, "*You appear to have forgotten your skirt. Is skirt off sick?*". He also grabs her bottom in an office lift.

In the sequel (released in 2004), *The Edge of Reason*, despite their relationship having ended, Daniel seeks Bridget out and makes a sexually inappropriate comment to her. Alive to the inappropriate nature of the behaviour, Bridget threatens to report him for sexual harassment. However, Daniel dismisses her rebuff with yet another inappropriate comment, asking, "*Is*

that your most serious skirt, Jones?".

By the time we get to the third instalment in the series (released in 2016 in the post #MeToo era), *Bridget Jones's Baby*, the rampant sexual harassment is less prevalent. Nevertheless, in one scene Jack Qwant – played by Patrick Dempsey – chases Bridget through the lobby of her workplace after they spent the night together, demanding to know why she left and did not contact him afterwards.

Finally, in *Bridget Jones: Mad About the Boy* (released in 2025), Bridget's new boss remarks that she "*looks hot*". Bridget points out that *"…that sort of language is a little outmoded in the workplace",* only to find that her boss really meant that she looked like she was having a menopausal hot flush.

What is the law?

Under the **Equality Act 2010,** sexual harassment is defined as any unwanted conduct of a sexual nature that violates a person's dignity or creates an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating, or offensive environment.

Employers may be vicariously liable for the actions of employees, meaning that sexual harassment committed by employees in the course of their employment can lead to claims against the employer as well as in the individual perpetrator.

Since October 2024, employers have also been subject to a duty

to take reasonable steps to prevent sexual harassment in the workplace.

The new Employment Rights Bill, expected to come into force in 2026, proposes to make the duty more onerous and require employers to take all reasonable steps to prevent sexual harassment in the workplace. The bill also proposes to extend protection for employees to harassment committed by a third-party (e.g. clients, contractors, conference or event attendees, and building maintenance workers).

Is this conduct sexual harassment?

Sexual harassment, under the Equality Act 2010, requires that the conduct be unwanted. In the first film, while Daniel's comments and actions are of a sexual nature, Bridget seems receptive to them, which means they are unlikely to meet the definition of harassment. However, it is not always possible to know whether a particular comment will be wanted or unwanted before it is made and this is why such comments in a work context can give rise to grievances and claims.

By the time we get to *The Edge of Reason*, the dynamic between the pair has changed. Daniel's repeated inappropriate comments are not welcomed by Bridget. However, the assessment of whether the behaviour would qualify as harassment is also context-dependent. While the comments certainly have the potential to create an unacceptable environment, Bridget may not feel that her dignity is violated or that the environment is intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive. Yet her threat to report Daniel for sexual harassment is a good indicator that she does feel that her dignity has been violating. And it would probably also count

as a “protected act”, meaning that any subsequent mistreatment might amount to victimisation.

In *Bridget Jones’s Baby*, Jack’s actions in pursuing Bridget could be considered unwanted conduct that creates an intimidating or degrading environment. However, Jack is a guest on the TV show not an employee of the TV company. Although employers currently have a duty to take reasonable steps to prevent sexual harassment by third parties, they are not vicariously liable for harassment by third parties, meaning Bridget would struggle to bring a claim. However, under the Employment Rights Bill, as currently drafted, employers will become responsible for harassment by third parties, such as Jack. If they have also failed in their duty to take reasonable steps to prevent such harassment then the compensation in such claims could be uplifted by up to 25%.

The comment from Bridget’s boss in *Mad About the Boy* that she “*looks hot*” is quickly clarified to be a non-sexual comment and, therefore, unlikely to amount to sexual harassment. However, humiliating comments about menopause could amount to harassment related to sex, age and/or disability.

What are the takeaways for employers?

Employers should consider the following points:

- **Risk assessment**: conduct a risk assessment to ascertain what the risks are for your specific business and how they might be mitigated. Don’t forget to assess the risks posed by third parties.

- **Training**: ensure that staff receive training on how to recognise and report sexual harassment (and other types of harassment) and victimisation. Managers should be trained separately on their responsibilities to help prevent it.

- **Policies**: have a specific policy on sexual harassment (and other types of harassment) which makes it clear what behaviours are unacceptable and when disciplinary action will be taken. Make sure third parties are aware of your approach to sexual harassment.

- **Reporting**: encourage staff to report incidents of sexual harassment as well as situations where they felt at risk, even if nothing happened.

- **Review**: keep your training and policies under review and refresh them as needed.

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