

Personal Safety in the Workplace

Guidance Provided by the University of Oxford Security Service

Although designed with the concerns of women in mind, this information applies to all workers.

Personal safety is a concern for many women in the workplace. Women sometimes find themselves in situations which can be frightening, threatening, and potentially dangerous or violent. This information is provided as an educational tool to promote and advance workplace safety for women.

No matter where you work, or what type of work you do, you can reduce the risk of violence in the work place by increasing personal awareness and planning responses to threatening situations. Employers can introduce some basic home safety devices and train staff in safety awareness, and business owners can work together to set up safety programs.

Workplace Security

- Ensure that everyone knows and follows existing safety measures, fire procedures, and escape routes.
- Plan emergency exits. Know about safe places and emergency phones and fire points.
- Know who is responsible for building security and who to contact in an emergency.
- Consider having locked toilets (staff to have key each).
- Always place purses and valuables out of sight.
- Install a communication or panic alarm at the reception desk and in isolated work areas (libraries, storerooms etc). Have a policy for response to the alarm.
- Try to ensure that receptionists have more than one escape route.
- Have the reception area and internal corridors covered by CCTV if possible.
- Ensure the reception area is well lit.
- Make sure that back doors or secondary doors are kept locked.
- Ensure that fire exits are kept clear of rubbish or furniture.
- Install good outside lighting and make sure it is well maintained
- Try and arrange for staff to go to car parks and/or bus stops in pairs.

Working with the Public

- If you have to deal with hostile or threatening persons regularly, have a workplace safety audit conducted by your department.
- Ensure that persons entering the department are properly identified before access is permitted.
- If you are suspicious of persons hanging around inform your security department or the police. Try to get an accurate description down on paper before calling.
- Be assertive and confident. Look at and greet all visitors.
- If you feel uncomfortable after someone enters, trust your instincts. Look directly at the person; politely enquire if you can help them. Be prepared to call for help if necessary.
- Use assertive, but respectful language. Do not be intimidated but try to keep a barrier such as a desk between you.
- Avoid discussing where you live, after work plans or holiday plans in front of, or with, visitors you do not know. Equally, do not release any information about colleagues to strangers either face to face or on the phone.
- Ensure personal details of staff are not freely available to visitors to the department.

- Try to avoid working alone or working late. If you must, ensure you know how to summon assistance, the location of the nearest phone, panic alarm or safe place.
- If threatened, seek immediate assistance and do not be afraid to make a scene or be very noisy.

Working Alone

- Try not to work alone, particularly after hours.
- Together with a colleague check the department to ensure you know who is left in the department and that toilets and storerooms are empty before the colleague leaves.
- Let security know you are working and tell them when you intend to leave.
- If you feel particularly vulnerable get security to ring you every hour.
- When you are finished ask security or someone else you know to escort you to your car or the bus stop.
- If you suspect someone is lurking outside, call the police or security to check it out.
- Know the number to ring to summon assistance and where if necessary you can lock yourself in (a safe place).
- If you regularly work alone, get a mobile phone and a personal alarm.

Workplace Interactions

- Trust your instincts. If somebody you work with makes you uncomfortable, discuss the situation with a colleague you trust and plan your response to potential problems.
- Use assertive behaviour with workers who concern you.
- If you feel you are being sexually harassed, take action. You have a right to feel comfortable in your workplace.
- If you feel threatened, make a scene, yell, be noisy.
- When you enter an office or meeting place alone, be aware of your surroundings.
- If you meet new work contacts out of the workplace, ensure you remain in a public place. Do not divulge personal information about yourself or colleagues.
- Avoid having new work contacts escort you after hours to your car or the bus stop unless absolutely necessary, or until you know them well.
- When entering a lift at work, stand next to the controls. Wait for the next lift if you feel uneasy about the occupants. Get out at any floor if you are worried or uncomfortable.

Business Travel

Before Leaving

- Make sure your home looks occupied. Have timers on some lights to turn them on and off. If possible have a neighbour or good friend visit to open and close curtains, remove mail, papers etc.
- Allow your neighbour to park in front of your garage or your driveway whilst you are away.
- Tell staff, friends and family where you are going, where you are staying and how to get in contact with you in an emergency.
- Have a mobile phone and charger with you.
- Put only your last name and business address on your luggage. Do not provide any information as to gender or a private address.

If you are flying

- Ensure that check in knows that you are travelling alone and ask to be seated next to another female if you wish.
- If you leave your vehicle at the airport, ensure that nothing is left in it that can be traced to your home address.
- When parking at the airport, if undercover, make sure the area is well lit and preferably close to airport buildings. On your return if it's late, hire a porter to escort you and your luggage to your car, no matter how little luggage you may have.
- When parking at the airport, if a long stay open area, try and park next to the airport shuttle bus stop. On your return, if late, ask the bus driver to watch you return to your car and open it before he leaves.
- Do not accept lifts from people you have met on the plane, and be cautious about sharing taxis.

Upon Arrival

- If your work takes you to new and different settings, be alert and make mental notes of your surroundings when you arrive. Make sure colleagues know you have arrived at the earliest opportunity and provide a contact number.
- Choose a good hotel, or have the company you are visiting recommend one, be prepared to change it if the area doesn't look right. Have hotel staff show you to your room and escort you into it.
- Make sure your reservation is guaranteed if you are arriving late.
- Ensure that door, windows and night locks are working properly.
- Provide your own security such as a simple door wedge for when you are in the room.
- Use a business card to check in, or your initials and surname, nothing else.
- Give instructions not to reveal your room number or your name.
- Get a room on upper floors close to lifts. Avoid stairwells and fire exits.
- Do not enter your room if you suspect someone is in it. Summon a member of staff.
- Verify with reception before permitting hotel employees to enter your room.
- If staying in a travel lodge or motel make sure you stay in a populated area of the complex, preferably near reception, even if it may be a bit noisier.
- Check any vehicles provided for your use thoroughly and make sure you are conversant with all controls and locking systems before using it (see also commuting).

Coming Home

- If you believe that your home has been broken into, do not enter, Call the Police.

Commuting

Walking

- Plan your route carefully; avoid short cuts and unlit areas.
- Walk on well-lit streets, in the centre of the pavement and away from bushes, doorways and parked cars - anywhere that an attacker might hide. Cross the road if necessary.
- Keep your keys in your hand.
- Walk confidently and with purpose. Observe your surroundings.

- If you suspect you are being followed, cross the street, go to the nearest home or business and seek assistance and if necessary summon the police.
- Walk facing traffic. If someone in a car is bothering you, turn around and walk in the opposite direction. Try and get the licence plate number and tell the police.
- If you feel something isn't right, you are probably right, trust your feelings and act.
- Do not use a personal stereo, or struggle with heavy luggage or packages, all reduce your ability to react.
- Carry a personal alarm and have it ready for use, especially at night.
- Wear comfortable clothing and shoes, you may have to run.
- If you have to use a stairwell, be sure it is well lit or find another route.
- Report anything suspicious to employers, security, or the police.
- If you think someone is following you, turn around and be blatant about checking him or her. Let them know you are aware of their presence. Go to a place of safety such as a shop, pub, or restaurant and ask for help. Do not go to your house or car.

Riding the Bus or Train

- Know the timetable.
- On the bus sit near the driver or in a crowd.
- On the train try to avoid empty carriages.
- If you are alone at the bus stop be prepared to move to another one.
- Be alert to empty isolated railway stations - try and be met by a friend.
- If it is late take a taxi, but make sure it's one you have ordered, ask the driver who he is expecting to pick up. Only hail a passing taxi in an emergency.

Your Car

- Keep your doors locked at all times whilst driving and when leaving your vehicle unattended, even for a moment.
- Before entering the vehicle, look inside to make sure no one is hiding inside, even if the doors were locked.
- When returning to the car have your keys to hand, so you don't have to spend extra time searching for them.
- Keep your purse and valuables out of sight, not on the front seat. It's a temptation for thieves to break into the car and grab them whilst you are stopped in traffic.
- Have a good look round before leaving the car.
- Travel on well-lit streets and well-travelled roads.
- Do not stop to help a stranded motorist. Report their predicament to the police or rescue services at a safe place to stop but well away from the incident.
- Have a "HELP! CALL POLICE" sign in your car for emergencies.
- If you suspect you are being followed, drive to the nearest police station or garage and blow your horn, do not leave the vehicle.
- Keep your car in good repair and the petrol tank at least a quarter full.
- Carry a mobile phone and join a breakdown organisation.
- Keep a warm coat and a blanket in the car for emergencies.
- Do not give lifts to hitchhikers.
- Park in well lit places and leave nothing in the car to identify you.
- Do not identify your car keys with your car number or home address.

- Do not open your car window more than a couple of centimetres to speak to someone approaching your car.
- If you have been involved in a minor accident in an isolated area, ask the other person to follow you to the nearest police station to sort the matter out.

If your car breaks down

- Place the “HELP! CALL POLICE” sign in the window. Do not raise the bonnet of the vehicle, as it will prevent you noticing if someone is approaching. Put on the four-way flashers.
- Or use your mobile to phone the breakdown service. Don’t forget to tell them you are female and alone. Ask the controller to ring you back and tell you which garage will be attending, with the name of the person if possible, and how long you will have to wait.
- Stay in the car with the windows closed and doors locked, unless you are on the motorway, when you must retreat to the hard shoulder and behind the Armco barrier.
- Before getting out of the vehicle on a normal road, make sure the police have arrived or the expected breakdown vehicle with named driver is present.
- Do not be embarrassed to say no to other people who stop to offer assistance.

If You are Attacked

- If you are grabbed, don’t freeze or panic. Breathe deeply to calm yourself and then try to gain attention. Yell loudly and repeatedly; try shouting words like FIRE, HELP, NO and STOP. Use your personal safety alarm or bang on something noisy. Be very loud and persistent.
- If there is someone near-by give them instructions to help you, such as “You in the red jacket, call the police” This will encourage any passers by to help you when they might not know what action to take.
- If an attacker is after your purse, let it go if you look like getting hurt.
- If you decide to fight back, remember there are many effective ways of responding to each type of attack. Prepare yourself to fight back, do whatever feels right for you. Try to imagine yourself responding successfully to different types of attack situations. Practice taking deep breaths to keep calm. Self-defence courses can teach you valuable skills and help you learn about vulnerable parts of the body, but the best defence is to be vigilant and ready to respond.
- Take advantage of any weapons you might have. Keys, a purse, an umbrella, or a comb may all be effective weapons. Be observant and aware of your surroundings.
- Only you can decide how you will respond to an attack and how to respond if the attacker has a weapon. Use whatever force you feel necessary to escape the situation. Be ready to take the first opportunity to take action and get away.

A Workplace Safety Checklist

- Are there plans in place for employee safety and do you know the plans?
- Are employees encouraged to look out for each other?
- Is the physical space safe?
- Are there standard first aid kits in the workplace?
- Do all employees know the location of the first aid kits?
- Are emergency telephone numbers prominently displayed?
- Are Fire exits clearly marked?

- Are Fire procedures regularly rehearsed?
- Are Health and Safety statements displayed and contact numbers available?
- Are the personal safety needs of employees taken into consideration?

If there are items on which you would welcome advice, or believe should be included, you are invited to contact the University Crime Prevention Officer on (2)72945 to discuss the matter.

You are also advised that the UCPO maintains a stock of personal safety alarms, which are available for purchase at cost price, by members of the University.

NB. Personal safety alarms are also available on a short loan basis from the stores in either the Denys Wilkinson Building or the Clarendon Laboratory.