

Safer Larping

A package of materials
to combat and prevent
harassment



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What package of materials?

This package of materials discusses sexual harassment and assault and combating and preventing them. It has been assembled as a tool for use in larps, but it can also be applied to tabletop role-playing games and various events. Discrimination, sexism and other forms of harassment often coexist with sexual harassment, but aren't the focus of this package.

The package consists of four parts. **Part one** defines the concept of harassment particularly in the context of live role-playing games. **Part two** looks at acting in harassment situations from four different points of view: those of game organizers, harassees, harassers and onlookers. **Part three** includes practical tips for game organizers to increase safety in their events, and a

model text of an anti-harassment manifesto. **Part four** includes tips on pre-game exercises which can be used to help players learn and hold on to their own boundaries.

Harassment and assault can exist anywhere. This package of materials is meant to acknowledge and recognize the existence of harassment and assault in Finnish larp culture and to help affect it. The end goal is of course to prevent harassment and make our hobby even safer. Underaged participants have been taken into consideration in the tips section of the package.

The package is free to use and apply to larps and events, with acknowledgement of the source.

This package of materials is meant to acknowledge and recognize the existence of harassment and assault in Finnish larp culture and to help affect it.

What is harassment?



What is harassment?



A fellow player sat really close to me in the sauna, so that I had to move. Didn't say anything or ask permission to touch, and there was plenty of free space to sit in the sauna. None of the others present commented on the situation, but pretended not to notice.

“Sexual harassment is unwanted attention relating to gender, such as derogatory or humiliating talk of another’s gender, gender related teasing, acts which make one feel embarrassed, afraid, insulted or angry.

Insinuations, sexually coloured jokes, speech and questions concerning one’s body, appearance or private life are examples of sexual harassment. Sexual propositions, demands, physical touches and rape or the attempt of rape are sexual harassment. Harassment can also take place over the phone or the internet. Sexual attention becomes harassment when it is continued after the target of the attention expresses that the attention is unwelcome. ”

([The Mannerheim League for Child Welfare](#))

The Finnish language website hairinta.info lists examples of harassment:

PHYSICAL

- Physical come-ons, hugging or touching without permission, pressing up on someone, petting or patting
- Tearing or ripping clothes, pulling or lifting the person
- Sexual violence, forcefully having sex or forcing to commit a sexual act

VERBAL

- Name calling, indecent comments, sexual propositions and demands.

- Indecent jokes, judgements or comments concerning sexual morality or attractiveness.
- Remarks or judgement concerning another’s body, clothing or private life
- Offering money, items or intoxicants in exchange for sex
- Or other harassment perceived as uncomfortable

OTHER FORMS OF HARASSMENT

- Displaying sexual material
- Overtly sexual body language; Winking, staring, sexual gestures, faces or vocalizations
- Photographing another without permission, spreading images or videos without permission
- Unwelcome text messages, letters, phone calls or comments on the internet

SOME CONSEQUENCES OF HARASSMENT CAN BE

- Powerful negative emotions, thoughts and self blame
- Depression, stress symptoms, other psychic illnesses
- Expanding problems in personal relationships
- The desire to switch hobby groups, groups of friends, or places of study or employment etc. Detachment issues. Repeated illnesses and withdrawal, problems with health and well being.
- Inability to take part in the activities where the harassment was encountered at all.

We recommend visiting <http://righttochoose.fi/en/> for some further remarks and a checklist of what to do if you have been raped. The police’s web link for reporting an offence online is http://www.poliisi.fi/crimes/reporting_an_offence_online .



I had a short sexual fling with another larper. I clearly told them I didn't want a relationship. The fling ended soon, but later I have heard them claim even to our common friends that we had a relationship. Twisting the truth angers and insults.

The purpose of this material is to focus particularly on forms of harassment which aren't outright criminal but are harder to detect and name.

Many larpers who have shared their experiences say they were harassed in just such a way. Repeating the acts even after the target has expressed being uncomfortable is an essential part.

Live role-players represent age groups from children to the elderly. They hail from around Finland or the world, they have different personal backgrounds and they represent different (gaming) cultures. When different customs and backgrounds meet, harassing situations also occur more easily. Guaranteeing everyone a safe environment for playing can demand compromising on one's customary habits and taking into account things which one hasn't thought of before, or which might feel unnecessary or silly.

Harassment can occur before, during or after the game. It of course also happens without the context of a game. This material focuses particularly on handling and tackling harassment related to games.

It is worth remembering that people of all genders can harass or be harassed. The assumption of the man as the harasser and the woman as the harassed can be accurate in most cases, but not all of them

Harassment can take particular forms in larp. Below is a list of some examples of situations in larps that can be harassment. Some examples are clearly harassment, others can be more borderline. Expressing interest or a misunderstanding can be discerned from harassment by the unwanted acts continuing even after the target of the acts have expressed not wanting to experience them.

- **Unwanted touching** such as hugging or massaging, holding, kissing, sitting in another's lap
- **Criticising or sexually charged comments** for example about one's appearance or behaviour (jokes, compliments, critique)
- **Pressuring one into distressing acts or situations** (bathing nude in a mixed sauna or sauna turns, intimacy for example during the game or after it or in sleeping facilities, drinking alcohol) or to play harder ("HC-style")
- **Repeatedly attempting to play romantic relationships** with a particular player
- **Crossing agreed boundaries** in game situations, ignoring the use of safe words or negative or public comments about safe word usage after the game.
- **Repeatedly seeking companionship** or messaging frequently
- **Spreading untrue rumours, denigrating**

“

My opposing player was excited about our characters' romantic contact and directed our pre-larp roleplay and planning towards a sexual direction despite repeated changes of subject (for example by commenting on appearance and insinuating).

At the game location before the game they took plenty of physical contact and expressed that they 'don't have limits' when it comes to physical intimacy.

Refusal can be expressed in other ways than direct verbal denials (which often demand the most courage, experience etc.) Communication can be wordless. It can be withdrawing further, becoming silent, evading or leaving the situation. Verbalising one's boundaries is crucial, but lack of a verbal denial does not mean consenting to tolerate harassing behaviour. If you aren't adept at reading nonverbal communication, you can always confirm that the situation is comfortable by asking your conversation partner or someone else present.

“No” or another denial is a safe word. No-one's “no” means “yes”. Laughing or smiling doesn't change the weight of a denial. It should always be taken seriously, and it should always be used seriously. Toying with denials devalues them.

“No” or another denial is a safe word.

What is unlikely to be harassment?

The target of an act determines whether the act is harassment or not. It may be safely said that certain habits which have been established when meeting new people are rarely harassment. For example, shaking hands or reasonable, well mannered critique of another's action probably isn't harassment. Appropriate expression of interest (including sexual or romantic) towards another isn't harassment.

When meeting harassment



When meeting harassment

Interrupting harassment as it's target or as an onlooker is always difficult. It can be particularly difficult in a community such as larpers, where people often know each other and where people are in different social positions in relation to each other. In this context it's important to acknowledge that some people have more power and social capital than others, and the danger is that the same rules don't apply to them as others.

Some people have more power and social capital than others.

“

In one game in an off-game room a male player asked me to join in group sex with him and another female player: when I refused he was angered and was rude towards me ever since.

Another male player after another game came on to me sexually by putting his hand in my crotch. I was underage and both players were considerably older. I haven't played in a long time because of these.

When you suspect harassment

When as a player, friend or even a passer-by you encounter a situation which has you questioning its nature, it's good to intervene. In a larp or related event, the threshold for intervention can be higher. We know each other, we want to be included, we have different sorts of power in relation to one another, and we have different customs. Some key points can be named:

- **Ask** if the situation is ok.
- **Intervene** in harassing behaviour and name it. If needed, ask for help.
- **Make sure** the target of the harassment is safe.
- **Respect** the wishes of the harassed on how to move forward. Don't go against their wishes and try to handle the situation alone! If possible, the matter should also be addressed with the harasser, so that they can change their behaviour. If the target of the harassment doesn't want to take it further however, that's okay.
- **Direct** the target of the harassment to the harassment contact person or game organizer.

Communality also offers a particularly good practice to prevent and stop harassment. It has sometimes been called "Dude, not cool" in the nordic larp scene. It is a practice of mutual social control in which others condemn improper behaviour, preferably before it even happens. The image of such a control situation is often quite masculine, so that a male harasser is thought to listen best to other males as "his equal". In truth, mutual social control can work within any group.

The key idea is that issues are easier to speak of and messages easier to accept within one's social group. Control can also work in a situation in which one repeatedly hears tell of a particular person's harassing behaviour. The issue could then be brought up appropriately. Condemning improper behaviour does not need to mean exclusion from the group or lasting shame.

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[In the debriefing event of a role-playing event] a few years ago there was an incident in which a tiny sauna was packed full of a large group of men plus me. I felt safe and nobody harassed me. But one of the men started throwing harassing homosexually charged jokes and began touching the others.

The entire saunaful of men froze and couldn't act in the surprising situation. As a woman I intervened and managed to remove the harasser from the sauna. The men thanked me and said they were astonished for freezing like they had.

When you are harassed

(what to do in a perfect world)

- Name the act and ask them to stop (“I don’t want you to touch me, let go!”)
- Leave the situation and tell safe people about it
- Tell the game organizers about the situation
- Clear the situation with the harasser

It’s great if you can act like this when experiencing harassment! Unfortunately in real life it isn’t always easy or even possible. In the situation itself you may not recognize that you are being harassed. You may think that perhaps it was an accident or misinterpretation, or maybe “That’s just the way they are”.

You may not dare speak to anyone about it because “It wasn’t such a big deal!”, “What if they get offended?”, “They’re a nice person when they’re sober!” or “It’s such a long time ago...”. Or perhaps you simply want no contact with the harasser because their acts were distressing. Thoughts like these are normal.

Therefore it’s important to ponder another kind of directive. Drafting it is noticeably more complicated. It’s essential that there is no right or wrong way to act. You’re not required to do anything unless you want to or unless you believe clearing the issue will help you. Your own well-being and coping comes first.

“

On the camps of a particular role-playing organisation one of the organizers fucked around with and joked about the appearance, sexiness and age of consent of kids they assumed were girls.

Publicly he warned the other “guys” from touching minors, and when nobody was watching kept pulling the same minors aside and doing everything from propositioning and touching to pressuring into sex. Few knew and no-one spoke, least of all the targets, for fear of repercussions and being branded.

You define what is harassment to you, nobody else.

When you are harassed

(real life version)

- You may be able to put your uncomfortable feelings to words only much later. You may realize the behaviour directed towards you was indeed harassment...
- ... or perhaps you may well know it was harassment, but at the moment you couldn't act or didn't know what to do.
- Try to talk about it in a safe environment.
- If your experience was an incident of clear, intentional assault, consider reporting it as a crime.
- If you have the strength, discuss what happened with the perpetrator. Sometimes harassment can stem from thoughtlessness or different customs, so listening to the harassers version of events is fair and can lead to clearing up a misunderstanding. Ask for help if you need to. Sometimes it can be easier to bring it up over a chat or an email than face to face.
- If you can't or don't want to personally converse with the harasser, ask for help. Someone else can have the discussion for you.
- Consider carefully before exposing the harasser by name in social media. Names have been shared for example if the perpetrator has been convicted of a crime or if their activity has gone on long and touched many. When is a warning in order? When is it a lynching? Naming harassers should especially be avoided if there has been no discussion with the harasser to clear things up, and if it's second hand information.
- Remember that being harassed is not your fault.
- You define what is harassment to you, nobody else.

The well-being, recovery and coping of the harassed take priority. The decision to possibly intervene in an incident can take a long time to come to and should not be seen as an obligation. Sometimes leaving a harassing situation alone feels easiest. The harassed has a right to this, and they shouldn't be pressured to take the matter forward. However, a point worth considering is the perpetrator's answerability for their acts, and the possible prevention of similar harassment towards others. In the worst case scenario the harassment could continue because it remains unchallenged. What's the right thing to do in this situation? It's a difficult question which depends on the situation.

“

The hardest part in the harassment case I experienced was that the offending party was a friend and we're both women. Before the game we had agreed upon our physical boundaries which were defined as very flexible for both parties. There was no reason to fear we wouldn't respect each other's boundaries or know how to pay attention to each other.

However, in the game my co-player's powerful physical closeness highly distressed me as there was no way for me to naturally escape the situation (I was physically trapped), and I couldn't verbalize my distress either.

When you're told about harassment

(as an organizer)

- **Listen.** Take the matter seriously, don't question or look for reasons.
- **Most importantly, don't say this:** "Why are you only telling about it now?" or "Well, that's just what they're like, don't worry about it."
- **You can be told about acute harassment, harassment that took place shortly before or harassment which happened a long time ago. The threshold of intervening grows as time goes by. You should still find some way to deal with it.**
- **In an acute harassment situation: Interrupt the situation and handle it together with the harasser, harassed and the harassment contact person. Follow the wishes of the harassed on how to proceed in the situation.**

Intervening in a harassment situation can be difficult. It can be particularly difficult if the harasser and harassed are your own friends. Taking sides can seem unpleasant. However, a game organizer has the responsibility to intervene in harassment taking place in their game. It's not necessary to know how to do it all on their own, but they should make sure there is a suitable player in the game to do this (for example a harassment contact person). Don't be afraid to ask for help.

If the harassment takes place in an in-game situation, organize events so that the harassed doesn't have to meet the harasser during the rest of the game if they so wish. You also have the right to prompt the offender to leave the event if the situation demands it. The right to physical untouchability should not be broken. If the harasser doesn't leave despite the prompt, contact the police.

- **In a harassment situation you hear about later: contact the harassed (or ask the harassment contact person to do so) and ask how they want to proceed in the situation. If possible, it would be important to contact the harasser so that they can change their behaviour. Remember to respect the wishes of the target of the harassment, however.**

A game organizer has the responsibility to intervene in harassment taking place in their game. They should make sure there is a suitable person in the game to do this.

When you are accused of harassing

- If the situation is happening right now, stop immediately. Apologize.
- Listen. The accusation can feel unfair or unbelievable, but remember that the harassed individual decides whether an act is disturbing to them or not - not you.
- Clarify the situation with the harassed if they wish it. A harassment contact person or game organizer can be present, also by your request. Harassment can occur due to thoughtlessness or a different culture, and a conversation may clarify the situation.
- Follow the harassed's wish on how your interactions will be in the future.
- Even if the situation happened a long time ago, be constructive towards a clarification request anyway.
- If it feels difficult to start discussing an issue, ask for help. Sometimes difficult subjects can be easier to address over a chat or email than face to face.
- If you repeatedly encounter accusations of harassment, it's worth it to talk about it with trusted friends or family members and/or seek professional counseling.

The accusation can feel unfair or unbelievable, but remember that the harassed individual decides whether an act is disturbing to them or not - not you.

If you suspect you have harassed someone

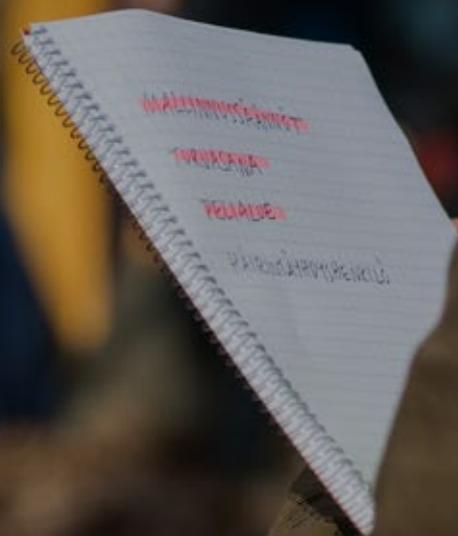
- Bring it up with the potential harassed person. You can ask a harassment contact person or game organizer to be present.
- Late is better than never. Sometimes a difficult subject can be easier to address over a chat or email than face to face.
- Follow the harassed's wishes on how to interact with each other in the future etc.

Sometimes a difficult subject can be easier to address over a chat or email than face to face.

“

I don't think I'm the only one who's been left speechless in the midst of a distressing situation or who has a hard time speaking about these things in a circle of friends or hobbyists the harasser is in.

A game organizer's checklist



A game organizer's checklist

This list can be used as an aid to plan measures to combat harassment in a game or an event.

PRE-PLANNING

- **Who is the game's harassment contact person, or who can a player experiencing harassment contact?**
 - The harassment contact person should be dedicated to their task, so they shouldn't have other responsibilities. They should be easy to approach, empathic and socially skilled.
 - Sometimes it's easiest to talk to someone of your own gender, perhaps there's a need for several contact persons?
 - **Has talking about harassment been made easy enough, for example by:**
 - Introducing the game's anti-harassment policy on the game's website,
 - Introducing the harassment contact person
 - Reminding about harassment in the game's information emails
 - Organising pre-game workshops (see part IV)
 - Discussing the issue in player meetings
 - **If minors are present in the game, how are they ensured a safe environment for play? Could they have their own support person? How about contact with their guardian? A permit slip or a conversation may set the mind at ease.**
 - **How to act if a known harasser signs up for your game? How are rumours of harassment related to?**
- **What's the line on alcohol usage? How is it monitored and what is done if someone breaks instructions? Do the rules apply to everybody?**
 - **If minors are present, careful consideration should be given to alcohol policy. The recommendation is an entirely alcohol free event.**
 - **How has lodging been arranged? How is adequate privacy ensured for example if some players have to sleep in a shared bed on the floor? How can a player choose their sleeping company?**
 - **What actions are taken if someone in the event harasses or assaults another?**

PREVENTATIVE MEASURES

- **What personal boundary enforcing and discussion encouraging exercises can be done before the game? Is there a capable person to organize such exercises?**
- **How are harassment issues discussed in the game's briefing? Is the seriousness of the issue conveyed? Is this the right time for humour?**
- **How are harassment issues discussed in the game's debriefing?**
- **How is the threshold to contact the harassment contact person lowered? For example, could they send the players their own greeting?**

PRACTICAL MATTERS

- **Do all players have comfortable and equal opportunities for lodging, bathing and sauna? Have shifts been scheduled fairly?**

Workshops to practise setting boundaries

WORKSHOPS
- gestures
- traffic light

Workshops to practise setting boundaries

Safe words and game mechanics (for example the traffic light system) can be used to create a culture of safety and encourage practices with which players can more easily uphold their own boundaries and negotiate appropriate content. Safe words and game mechanics are often designed for use in in-game situations. However, there is no reason why they couldn't also be used in distressing off-game situations. More about safe words and other mechanics can be read for example from blogs by *Johanna Koljonen*, *Eirik Fatland* and *Lizzie Stark*.

<https://participationsafety.wordpress.com>
<http://larpwright.efatland.com/?p=339>
<http://leavingmundania.com/2014/02/27/primer-safety-in-roleplaying-games/>

Here are a few examples of exercises which can be used to bolster knowledge of one's boundaries, communication of them and understanding of harassing behaviour both in- and off-game. The exercises are based on aforementioned blog posts and they have been used in games and in pre-game meetings. Notice! It's worth it to have the exercises run by someone who has experience of the exercises and their goals.

A safe word is used to interrupt a game situation when it is going too far. The chosen safe word should be short, clear and easily rememberable even in a stressful situation, and one which isn't often used in other discussion. For example "Safe word" or "Off-game

stop" work. Using safe words isn't necessarily easy to do when the situation is on, so it's worth it for everyone to practise using them together in advance. The principle is that these exercises can be opted out of, and one can leave them at any moment without needing to explain oneself, even though participation is recommended.

PRACTISING USING A SAFE WORD

- **Introduction.** On the first round, the players shake hands and introduce themselves: Who they are and who they are playing. On the second round, players introduce themselves to a second player and ask them for a permission to hug. If both players agree, they continue hugging until one of them says the safe word.
- **Volume.** Participants speak, sing or vocalize in different ways. They begin silently and get progressively louder. Anyone can stop the noise with the safe word at any moment. If necessary, the safe word is repeated until the situation is interrupted.

There are many different mechanics like the safe word, used to interrupt game situations, such as the so called tap out -mechanic based on a tapping gesture, familiar from budo sports. Read more: <https://participationsafety.wordpress.com/2016/09/11/toolkit-the-tap-out/>

It's worth it to have the exercises run by someone who has experience of the exercises and their goals.

The traffic lights are a mechanic in which colours (red, yellow, green) are used to communicate one's boundaries in-game. "Red" means that boundaries have been crossed and the other player must immediately interrupt the situation and return to a safe distance. "Yellow" means that the current level of intensity of acceptable but further escalation would be too much. "Green" means the current level is acceptable and can even be escalated. "Green" can also be used to ask the other for harder measures, but the other player is of course not obliged to do so. "Green?" can also be used as a question to confirm the situation is still within appropriate bounds for the other player.

PRACTISING USING THE TRAFFIC LIGHTS

- **Touching.** Players introduce themselves, shake hands and hug in pairs. Contact is made with increasing boldness and touching more unusual places. Either of the pair can use "Green?" as a question to make sure, to which the other will answer. Either player can stabilize the situation at any moment by using "Yellow" or interrupt it by using "Red." The players can also speak to each other, for example to tell each other what they are going to do next. They can also invent boundaries, for example "No touching my elbows" or "No whispering".

- **This exercise may be particularly beneficial for players** who are likely to be in physical contact with each other during the game. Time can also be set aside for discussion about boundaries.

PRACTISING INTERRUPTING A QUESTIONABLE SITUATION

- **Participants are divided into groups.** Each participant receives a role and instructions from an organizer (for example: target of harassment, bystander and a harasser making come ons, pushing alcohol or feeling up the target). The situation is acted out and roles are switched around. The objective is to make the threshold to rebuke unwanted behaviour lower and practise interrupting it as a bystander. The organizer can also take the role of harasser if they don't want to give it to a player.
- **A pair or group exercise.** One or several players suggest different things (for example "Would you like a beer?", "Can I hug you?", or "X has some nice tits!"), the other(s) appropriately refuse them (for example "No thank you", "Not right now, thank you" or "I think that's a bit inappropriate."). If the others reply favourably, the suggester can escalate further, such as by asking "Could you give me a neck rub?", "I'll sit in your lap" or similar.

Anti-harassment principles

(an example)

Game websites or similar places often have instructions on playing style, game practices etc. Anti-harassment principles can easily be added to these to give the matter visibility. The principles themselves can be very concise and for example this material can be offered for players accepted to the game to read. General instructions can also be listed, and they can be edited on a per-game basis. The text below is an example.

Assault and harassment will not be tolerated in this game (except as in-game actions by game characters with respect towards the boundaries of all parties). The goal is to create a safe gaming environment together for each participant of the game.

An anti-harassment material package is applied in this game. [Link for example to this material]. Anyone participating in the game should acquaint themselves thoroughly with the material and commit to furthering a game environment of safety and combating harassment with their own actions.

General directions:

- Personal space, boundaries and customs are different for different people. Some only want to touch their closest friends. Some only want to go to sauna with persons of their own gender. Some don't want to go to a sauna at all. Some don't want to drink any alcohol. We will respect each other's boundaries.
- If we aren't well acquainted with another, we will greet them with a handshake. We will ask permission if we want to hug or touch in other ways.
- Sexist and discriminating talk, behaviour and customs will be avoided and intervened with whenever they are encountered.

Support from social media

The [Larp Women Unite Suomi](#) group on Facebook is a relatively safe place to discuss incidents of harassment. The [Larp Women Unite \(International\)](#) -group also has open discussion on experiences.

[Larp Men Unite \(International\)](#) can also be used for discussion.

There are also Facebook groups directed towards gender and sexual minorities. These groups are not public. Contact the the editor if this material (niina.niskanen@iki.fi) and they will direct you to a person who knows more about minority larpers' groups.

Suggestions for edits to this material package can be sent to niina.niskanen@iki.fi.

Credits

Design, editing and writing

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**Personal accounts of harassment have been
gathered anonymously from Finnish live
role-players.**