
Sexual Harassment at Work: Why It Happens, What to Do about It

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The intimate violation of women by men is sufficiently pervasive in American society as to be nearly invisible. Contained by internalized and structured forms of power, it has also been nearly inaudible. Women employed in the paid labor force—typically hired “as women,” dependent on their income, and lacking job alternatives—are particularly vulnerable to intimate violation in the form of sexual abuse at work.¹ Only recently has this problem of sexual harassment of female workers been given any significant attention. A systematic body of literature on this subject doesn’t exist. What does exist, however, are individual complaints by female workers throughout the country. The scant body of literature that has been produced suggests that the relatively powerless position occupied by female workers has contributed to their reluctance in exposing the issue. Finally, however, its impact on women’s economic status and work opportunities, not to mention psychic health and self-esteem, is beginning to be explored and documented.

Sexual harassment is defined as any unwanted pressure involving one’s sexuality. It includes verbal innuendoes and suggestive comments, leering, gestures, unwanted physical contact (touching, pinching, etc.), rape and attempted rape. It is a form of harassment mainly perpetrated by men against women. As in rape and sexual assault, the assertion of power and dominance and the desire to humiliate are often more important than the sexual interaction itself. In addition to being a personal violation, sexual

demands in the work place, especially between boss and employee, threaten a woman’s economic livelihood and create an atmosphere that is scarcely work-oriented.²

Definition and Scope

Sexual harassment may occur as a single encounter or as a series of incidents at work. It may place a sexual condition on employment opportunities as a clearly defined threshold, such as hiring, retention or advancement, or it may occur as a pervasive or continuing condition of the work environment. Complex forms include the persistent innuendos and continuing threat which are never consummated either sexually or economically. The most straightforward approach is: “Put out or get out.”

Of the limited number of cases brought to the courts, the types of harassment have varied, but the outcome in most cases has been the same. The first women to complain in the courts that sexual harassment was sex discrimination were all unsuccessful.

Corne and DeVane were two clerical workers at Bausch and Lomb who alleged that the repeated verbal and physical sexual advances, molestation and propositions by their male superior had made their jobs intolerable, forcing them to leave, while women who were sexually compliant received enhanced employment status. Their supervisor’s actions, the women alleged, limited them to “the choice of putting up with being manhandled, or being out of work.” They argued that the company, by allowing them to be supervised by a man who persistently took unsolicited and unwanted sexual liberties, created sex discriminatory conditions of employment.³ Dismissing the claim, Judge Frey held that sexual advances are not sex discrimination but “personal” and that the behavior was not “based on sex” because the sexes of the participants could have been reversed.

In another case, Margaret Miller, a black woman, alleged that her white supervisor promised her a better job if she would be sexually “cooperative” and caused her dismissal when she refused. She charged that Bank of America, in policy and practice, per-

It is essential that as many organizations as possible become involved in bringing this serious issue to the public's attention.

mitted men in supervisory position, in particular her supervisor, to demean women's dignity and that his sexual advances were part of a pattern.⁴ The ruling in this case was that the "isolated and unauthorized sex misconduct of one employee to another" could not be considered work place events for which the employer should be held liable.

Dianne Williams, a black public information specialist with the Justice Department, alleged in her complaint that she had had a good working relationship with her immediate supervisor, a black man, until she refused a sexual advance. Thereafter, she asserted that he "engaged in a continuing pattern and practice of harassment and humiliation of her, including . . . unwarranted reprimands, refusal to inform her of matters for the performance of her responsibilities, refusal to consider her proposals and recommendations, and refusal to recognize her as a competent professional in her field."⁵ Her supervisor alleged that her poor work performance during this same period led to her dismissal. The administrative tribunal thought the evidence did not establish "any causal relationship" between the rejection of her supervisor's sexual advances, his treatment of her and her termination.⁶ Williams appealed.

Exposure of sexual harassment in the services is also becoming more widespread. Army Major General Mary E. Clarke, commander of Fort McClellan, Alabama, in a recent testimony before the House Armed Services Military Personnel Subcommittee, referred to sexual harassment as a serious problem. At the same hearing, Rear Admiral Frances E. McKee, the Navy's Assistant Deputy Chief of Naval Personnel for Human Resource Management, said that a growing public awareness of the problem has helped. And Major General Norma Brown, commander of the Air Force's Technical Training Center at Chanute AFB, Illinois, called sexual harassment in the military "totally intolerable." Representative Marjorie Holt (R-Md.), also speaking at the Congressional hearing, said the key to ending the problem in the military is "educating people from the top down and the bottom up. People must realize this isn't right."⁷

About the Author:

James C. Renick has served on several EEO committees in the State of Florida and is a member of the Conference on Minority Public Administration. Dr. Renick is currently conducting research about the sexual harassment of state female workers in Florida. He received his Ph.D. from Florida State University in public administration.

Why Does It Happen?

The sex role stereotyping of women and their status in Western societies have contributed enormously to the lack of concern for the issue of sexual harassment. Many people still believe a woman's place is in the home. Women, it is claimed, are not career-oriented. They are less suited than men to many jobs, they do not stay in jobs, lack education and experience, are absent from work more often than men, are unable to travel, would not be accepted in positions of authority, and are incapable of making decisions based on fact and logic.⁸

In addition to the stereotyping of women, the double sexual standards for men and women in the American culture almost encourages the practice of sexual harassment. Male sex roles encourage men to be strong, aggressive, tough, dominant and competitive. These values, which have come to be considered "male," describe common male behavior in many spheres, including the sexual.⁹ On the other hand, powerful social conditioning of women to passivity, gentleness, submissiveness and receptivity to male initiative, particularly in sexual contact, tends effectively to constrain women from expressing sexual aggression (or even assertion).

Adding to the long list of reasons as to why sexual harassment occurs is the economic trap which many working women face daily. Sexual harassment of working women presents a closed system of social predation in which powerlessness builds powerless-

ness. Feelings are a material reality of it. Working women are defined, and survive by defining themselves, as sexually accessible and economically exploitable. Because they are economically vulnerable,

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they are always economically at risk. In this perspective, sexual harassment is less "epidemic" than endemic.¹⁰ Such views as, "Women really want unwanted sex," "It is relatively normal for males to seek sexual access to females who are their subordinates,"¹¹ and "Today's modern world requires that females in business and industry have a little tougher attitude towards life in general,"¹² only add to the frustration women feel in trying to have their complaints recognized.

The Problems Sexual Harassment Creates

Sexual harassment can create social problems, including unemployment, alcoholism and excessive drug use, upon which family disruptions, psychosomatic illness and mental illness follow. The harassed employee tends to take more sick leave and become accident-prone. Absenteeism rises among this group, and work attitudes become increasingly negative.

The effect of harassment on its victims can be devastating. There is a wide variety of reaction, depending on the individual intellect and temperament. The reactions range from extreme indignation and rage to depression and a greatly diminished self-image. Whether the initial reaction was one of depression, diminished self-worth or anger, the results of a study done with patients at the Work Clinic at the University of California Hospital in San Francisco in 1976 showed that the outcome follows some general disability pattern. Some women expressed their reaction by developing vague physical symptoms such as chronic fatigue, loss of strength, various aches, weaknesses and pains. Others reacted with depression and the symptoms of depression, such as sleeplessness and poor motivation. Still others reacted with psychological symptoms: nervousness, hypersensitivity, hostility, memory loss and feelings of victimization.¹³

Women's feelings about their experiences of sexual harassment are a significant part of its social impact. Like women who are raped, sexually harassed women may feel humiliated, degraded, ashamed, embarrassed and cheap, as well as angry. Those who complain, as well as those who don't, express fears that their complaints will be ignored, will not be believed, that they instead will be blamed, that they will be considered "unprofessional" or "asking for it," or will be told this problem is too silly or trivial for a grown woman to worry about, and that they are blowing it all out of proportion.¹⁴

A general picture of women's reactions to spe-

cific sexual harassment incidents from three separate surveys has helped elucidate the issues. The earliest "quasi-systematic" attempt at addressing the issue of sexual harassment was made by *Redbook* magazine in a national survey conducted in January and November of 1976, to which 9,000 women workers replied. Although the survey had some methodology drawbacks (e.g., the respondents were self-selected), the results still proved valuable in gauging the significance of the problem. Nine out of ten women surveyed reported that they had experienced one or more forms of unwanted attention on the job. Also, 75% of the women said they found these unwelcome attentions "embarrassing," "demeaning" or "intimidating."

In the study conducted by the Illinois Task Force on Sexual Harassment and Sangamon State University, of the 1,495 state female employees who replied to the survey, 63% agreed that sexual harassment was a serious problem, and 72% agreed that unwelcome male attentions on the job were offensive. When asked to comment on how they felt about these incidents, 74% reported they felt angry, 56.4% embarrassed and 28.5% felt intimidated. Only 1.5% felt flattered—a clear indication that women do not enjoy these experiences.¹⁵

Finally, the results of a study researched by the Working Women's United Institute in New York are equally disturbing. This institution provides resources for women who are sexually harassed, acts as a clearing house for information for lawyers and others, presents forums and workshops, and engages in research. Judging from the responses to their study, it is obvious that women neither want such attention nor are flattered by it: 78% of the women surveyed reported feeling "angry," 48% "upset," 23% "frightened," 3% "indifferent," and an additional 27%

Only 1.5% of the Illinois state female employees who were surveyed felt flattered by sexual attention at work.

mentioned feeling "alienated," "alone" and "helpless." They tended to believe the incidents were their fault and that they must have done something individually to elicit or encourage the behavior. Thinking that no one else is subjected to it, they felt individually complicit as well as demeaned. Almost a quarter of the women reported feeling "guilty."¹⁶

Sexual Harassment as Sex Discrimination

The contours of a legal understanding of the problem of sexual harassment of women are only beginning to emerge. As more cases are brought out and courts become more familiar with the essence of the claim, law on sexual harassment as sex discrimination is developing. Failure to recognize the social context and implications of incidents of sexual harassment has been a major element in those court decisions which

Professionals from social service agencies throughout the Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minnesota area came together in December, 1978 to form the Coalition Against Sexual Harassment (CASH). According to

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their first newsletter, "The coalition's goals and purposes include educating the public about sexual harassment, offering consultation about grievance procedures, providing advocacy for adult victims of sexual harassment, gathering data, and sharing information." It would be extremely beneficial if such organizations were formed throughout the country.

In Berkeley, California, a group of female sociology students at the University of California banded together as Women Organized Against Sexual Harassment (WOASH) and waged a campaign against professors who they felt were using the "power of the grade" to elicit sexual favors.

(Despite some misgivings, a Yale graduate student stated that, "A student making a major complaint would expose herself in a way that's more harmful than harassment. The complaint could have a much more profound effect on your future and the focus of your education than the instance of harassment."²¹ In a university setting, the effects of sexual harassment on a motivated woman who thinks of herself, and is, a serious worker or student is potentially devastating. Beyond the exclusionary and restrictive results, the feeling that she is not valued for her productivity, accomplishes or promise, but for her woman's body, can cast a pall of resentment and self-doubt over her working or academic career, if it does not drive her out of the pursuit altogether.)²²

To reduce the incidents of harassment, all supervisory personnel should be trained, if only minimally, to listen to those working under them. Management must be made aware that some individuals and groups are more susceptible to harassment than others. Both supervisor and manager must become aware of their responsibility to treat their workers as individuals and to make work as gratifying as possible for them. Grievance procedures should be established through which the harassed worker could apprise her (or his) supervisor and coworkers of harassment.²³

Beyond the "Personal"

Far from being simply individual and personal, sexual harassment is integral and crucial to a social context in which women as a group are allocated a disproportionately small share of wealth, power and advantages compared with men as a group. When women work outside the home, they typically occupy jobs that are low on the ladder of financial reward and per-

sonal satisfaction, independent of their aspirations, preparations or potential. Often they are shunted to dead-end "women's jobs." In this context, the problem of sexual harassment is revealed both as a manifestation and perpetuation of the socially disadvantaged status of women.

A man in a position of authority, whether a supervisor or a teacher, can use his hierarchically superordinate role to place conditions of sexual compliance on his female subordinate's access to the benefits of her job or her educational program. The necessity of dealing with sexual pressures that are, by virtue of the man's position and actions, bound up with the woman's desired goal (getting a job, doing a job, getting an education) burdens and restricts her access to the means of survival, security and achievement. In a society in which women as a group are at a comparative disadvantage to men, the negative impact that sexual harassment has on the maintenance or improvement of women's positions contributes to the continuation of their socially inferior condition.²⁴

The problem of sexual harassment cannot afford to go unresolved. With the changing economic conditions and the decreasing emphasis on sex roles, women not only deserve but expect to be treated as equals in the work place. And as women continue to enter the work force at unprecedented rates, it is imperative that employers reassess their attitudes toward female sexuality and allow women to take their rightful place in the working world, making equal contributions without fear of harassment, exploitation or discrimination. ■

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