

The Silent Epidemic: Sexual Abuse in the Workplace

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By Syndicated Columnist Cathy Harris

There is a silent epidemic in the workplace called “sexual workplace abuse.” It comes in the form of Sexism, Sex Discrimination and Sexual Harassment. Women who experience this abuse may sometimes be the breadwinner of their households or a single parent.

With 42% of single parents, which are usually women, living below the poverty line, risking homelessness, we must identify the root of issues that affect women in the workplace. We must level the playing field.

Women have limited participation in the American society. They are still discriminated against in most aspects of society. They are discriminated against in housing, education and especially in the workplace.

There is a lack of sensitivity towards women’s plights in the workplace because employees are uneducated when it comes to handling these types of sensitive issues. Women are treated poorly by their colleagues and superiors simply because they are women. And many will end up walking away from the workplace, simply because they don’t understand their rights.

More women vote than men, so why does this silent epidemic continue to flourish in the workplace? Why have there not been enough sufficient laws designed to protect women in the workplace?

With an alarming number of women now ending up in jail and prisons, we must now look at connecting “sexual workplace abuse” and other disparities in the workplace to the present conditions in the community.

When women file discrimination complaints also called EEO complaints, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) (<http://www.eeoc.gov>) will not protect them. EEO counselors will discourage them from filing or tell them that they filed the complaint too late. Once they file the complaint the retaliations and reprisals results in: 1) women being illegal terminated, 2) women being forced out on UNPAID stress leave, and 3) women who stay and work in the hostile work environments end up being severely depressed or suffering a nervous breakdown.

Depression is the number one barrier women face in the workplace. Many are on some type of anti-depressant. Working seems like an impossible task when you feel depressed.

According to surveys, untreated depression is a bigger obstacle to women's professional success than other issues such as child and elder-care responsibilities, pregnancy and sexual harassment.

Some depression has been brought on by other acts of illegal stalking and intimidation both on and off the job. In federal law enforcement (Customs, Immigration, ATF, Secret Service, IRS, etc.) male superiors would even go as far as to obtain Internal Affairs Agents who are mostly white men to follow women around the neighborhood, sit outside their homes, and threaten their families - especially if the women were single parents. And of course you could not report these acts to local police departments because they were in cahoots with federal law enforcement managers and internal affairs agents.

Sexism and sex discrimination is widespread in the workplace. Minority women managers are paid less than their male counterparts and in most cases earn less than white women - even when they may have more education.

Black women are the most underrepresented group in management.

Women managers, in general, are underrepresented in most of the highest-paying industries. But with a growing number of managers now becoming women in Corporate America - over 98% of leadership books are written by men. So we must recognize that men and women lead differently and revise these books as soon as possible.

We must also recognize that it's been men managers that have kept sensitivity, integrity, cultural diversity, Sexual Harassment and EEO training out of the workplace - similar to "the fox guarding the hen house..."

When women are forced off the job, many turn to prostitution or sell drugs. Many single parents will end up living with men they don't necessary want to be with - just to provide for their families. Sometimes this type of cohabitation ends up in domestic violence where these women are maimed or killed.

We know that harassment all too often goes unreported for a variety of reasons such as self-blame or threats of blackmail by coworkers or employers.

What it boils down to in many cases is a sense of powerlessness that we experience in the workplace, and our acceptance of a certain level of inability to control our careers and professional destinies. This sense of powerlessness is particularly troubling when research has shown that individuals with graduate education - experience more harassment than do persons with less than a high school diploma.

The message is when you try to obtain power through education; the harassment in general becomes worse.

Sexual Harassment is very pervasive and occurs today at an alarming rate. Statistics show that anywhere from 42 to 90 percent of women will experience some form of sexual harassment during their employed lives. But the statistics do not fully tell the story of the anguish of women who have been told in various ways on the first day of a job that sexual favors are expected; or the story of women who were sexually assaulted by men with whom they continued to work.

In federal law enforcement where sexual harassment is rampant throughout the agencies, women are constantly hounded for sex and many times will become the victims of "sexual assaults" at the hands of male co-workers and superiors as a result of "bully management."

Male managers caught sexual harassing women are sometimes forced to transfer to the southern border ports where working conditions are not up to everyday standards. That's why "border ports" are breeding grounds for "sexual harassment" and "sexual assaults" of women and children who enter into this country.

Some acts of sexual harassment includes: Sexist or stereotypical remarks about a person's clothing, body, appearance or activities; harassing or abusive remarks regarding a person's sexual activities or gender, religion, national origin, race, color, disability, sexual orientation, parental status, genetic information, or age; jokes, stories, remarks or discussions relating to the bases mentioned above; descriptions of sexual acts; posting graphic or offensive pictures; deliberately touching, pinching, patting, or giving inappropriate looks to another person; pressure for dates or sexual activity; unwelcome telephone calls, letters, electronic mail, etc. of a harassing nature; demands for sexual favors.

Remember the harasser can be anyone - a supervisor, peer, non-employee, or a contractor. Your job is liable under the Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) law when it knew or should have known of the conduct, unless the agency can demonstrate that it took quick and appropriate action.

We also know what happens when we "tell." We know that when harassment is reported the common reaction is disbelief or worse. Women who "tell" lose their jobs. Women even reported that those who reported acts of harassment not only lost their jobs, but they were accused of stealing and charges were brought against them.

Women who "tell" become emotionally wasted. Sometimes it takes months after a complaint or lawsuit was filed to begin feeling alive again.

Women who "tell" are not always supported by other women. This reaction only represents attempts to distance ourselves from the pain of the harassment experience.

What we are learning about harassment requires recognizing it when we encounter it. We are learning painfully that there is no shield of protection for us. Since that shield has failed us many fear reporting the acts and others feel it would do no good.

This silent epidemic results in less than 5 percent of women victims filing claims of harassment. But a recent report states that that number could be even smaller. The law needs to be more responsive to the reality of our experiences.

As we are learning, enforcing the law alone won't terminate the problem. What we are seeking is equality of treatment in the workplace.

Sexual harassment reinforces the stereotypical idea that women are objects, which undermines their basic human rights.

Yet other employees and the courts downplay the seriousness of the behavior (seeing it as normal sexual attraction between people) or commenting on the sensitivity of the victim.

These unwanted advances do not cease, which prompts many to question whether these advances derive from genuine interest in the person, or a need to feel powerful.

Many women are angry because this awful thing called harassment exists in a harsh and demeaning way. Many believe it is criminal and should be punished as such. It is a form of violence against women as well as a form of economic coercion, and our experiences suggest that it won't just go away.

We are angry because for a brief moment we believed that if the law allowed for women to be hired in the workplace, and if we worked hard like our male counterparts, equality would be achieved. Now we are realizing this is not true.

The reality is that this sense of inequality is to keep women in their place in the workplace.

How do we capture our rage and turn it into positive energy? Positive energy would be the power of women working together, whether it is in the political arena, in the context of a lawsuit, in community service or assisting women to become entrepreneurs.

When a woman is beaten or raped, either physically or mentally, these are human rights violations! We must seek to bring human rights home and guarantee the rights of all people especially women.

This "mental terrorism" against women must be halted at all costs!

Making the workplace a safer, more productive place for ourselves and our daughters should be a priority for all of us.

Definitions:

sex discrimination: discrimination based on sex and especially against women

sexism: discrimination based on gender, especially discrimination against women; attitudes or behavior based on traditional stereotypes of sexual roles.

sexual harassment: the making of unwanted and offensive sexual advances or of sexually offensive remarks or acts, especially by one in a superior or supervisory position or when acquiescence to such behavior is a condition of continued employment, promotion, or satisfactory evaluation.

sexual misconduct: conduct geared toward a sexual nature.

sexual predator: a person who's behavior is controlled by sexual behavior a majority of the time; one that victimizes, plunders, or destroys, especially for one's own gain.

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