'Move on': Whysexual harassment still thrives at work

Harvard Business Review report details how many women are forced into silence

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Complicity, not just by one person, but by various members of a company, is what keeps women silent about the sex-based harassment they experience in the workplace, according to a recently published Harvard Business Review (hbr.org) report titled "How Managers, Coworkers, and HR Pressure Women to Stay Silent About Harassment."

Authored by Dulini Fernando, associate professor at Warwick Business School, and Ajnesh Prasad, Canada research chair at Royal Roads University, the report looked at how women who have been harassed based simply on their gender are being silenced in their respective workplaces whenever they try to speak up on the issue.

The report contained interviews with 31 early and midcareer academic professionals working in business schools across nine research-intensive universities in the United Kingdom. Fernando and Prasad asked these women to talk about their experiences—as well as others' which they heard about—being insulted, bullied or excluded because of their gender.

All those interviewed said they sought help by sharing these experiences with line managers, HR personnel and colleagues—all of whom persuaded them to "move on and stop raising the issue," the report stated.

What Fernando and Prasad discovered in the course of their interviews were three common barriers encountered by victims who wanted to speak up: 1) they were told they had to prove that their experience was uncommon and significant; 2) they were expected to "trust the system" to resolve their issues; and 3) they faced severe consequences, such as a damaged reputation, when they challenged the system.

In a related study, "The Problem of Visibility for Women in Engineering, and How They Manage It," Fernando, along with Laurie Cohen, professor of work and organization at Nottingham University Business School, and Joanne Duberley, professor of organization studies at Birmingham Business School, focused on the paradox that women engineers face: they are excessively visible in an "ultra-mascu-

line" sector, but are still often overlooked when it comes to their technical expertise.

Fernando, Cohen and Duberley interviewed 50 women from three leading FTSE 100 organizations in the United Kingdom for this study.

The respondents said "they felt sexually objectified, and they had to work harder than men to prove their technical competence ... [and that] col- leagues often focused on their looks as opposed to their work."

The study found four common strategies that these women employed to counter these issues:

They conformed to "unchallenging" gender stereotypes by positioning themselves as a daughter or sister when interacting with male colleagues.

They embraced feminine stereotypes while demonstrating their technical expertise. One interviewee shared how her polished and colored nails became a running joke, and how colleagues would ask how she could function with them. The respondent said she would just "tell them to move over, and I get some gloves on and do [the work]."

They downplayed their gender, usually by being conservative with their appearance and moderating their behavior.

They tried to be "one of the boys."

So what can managers do about this? Fernando, Cohen and Duberley recommended that they first acknowledge the gender-stereotyping that these women engineers face.

"Implicit bias training has a role to play—not as a one-off quick fix, but through regular interventions specifically focused on how to remove stereotypical assumptions from recruitment, training and development and promotion," stated the report. "Take promotions, for example. Well-worn criteria about who is ready to advance cannot be taken for granted— they should be reviewed each time to ensure that they are applied in a systematic and transparent way to all candidates."

As for sex-based harassment, Fernando and Prasad stated in the report that "complicity [of various actors in an organization] not only provided a safe haven for perpetrators to operate, as they were spared punishment, but also made victims feel confused, unsupported, and, ultimately, compelled to acquiescence."

One interviewee shared how a senior colleague harassed her during her maternity leave by hinting that she "strategically" chose to have a child at that time.

Instead of expressing support, her team members told her to keep quiet about the issue so she wouldn't be seen as a parasite—which she ultimately did just to avoid any problem, even if she really wanted to speak up.

Fernando and Prasad made four recommendations to help companies get rid of such toxic culture: First, legitimize sexbased harassment complaints by having managers communicate to their team that they can complain. Policies to protect those with such grievances should also be put in place.

Second, establish a policy that defines exactly what sexbased harassment is, as well as the proper procedure for filing complaints. A mechanism to support victims during and after the grievance process is also needed.

Third, Fernando and Prasad stated in the report that "it is crucial to ensure that victims feel heard, their concerns are validated, and their complaints are taken seriously. They should be ensured action will be taken to hold culprits accountable and to prevent such cases from happening again. If people believe that injustice is covered up by the organization, this can negatively affect their commitment and motivation."

Finally, other employees should also be aware of how they respond to colleagues who share with them experiences, so as to avoid further cultivating the culture of silence.

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