

Report on Sexual Harassment in the Workplace

B.C. Federation of Labour,
Women's Rights Committee, and the
Vancouver Women's Research Centre,
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RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS ON SEXUAL HARASSMENT

In the questionnaire, 203 women were asked to indicate what kinds of sexual harassment, if any, they had experienced.

Ninety per cent of the respondents had experienced sexual harassment. Of the 10 per cent who had not experienced it themselves, over half saw it as a problem for working women and/or knew of incidents happening to others.

Displaying Nude and/or Suggestive Pictures of Women Where They Can Be Seen by Women Workers

Fifty-one women replied that they had experienced this form of sexual harassment.

Staring

Fourteen women mentioned specific examples of men staring in an offensive manner, the "undressing you with their eyes" look. The women were not talking about admiring or interested looks, but described an "aggressive" staring that went on "too long" or was concentrated on breasts or hips.

Demeaning or Derogatory Remarks

Seventy-eight women reported experiencing this problem in the workplace.

Women placed in this category remarks that were disrespectful, snide, insulting, hostile, and derogatory to women as a whole. These remarks were *about* other women (including men speaking about their own wives) or *to* the women themselves.

Sexual Remarks

This, along with touching, was one of the most commonly discussed problems. Seventy-seven women stated that they had experienced this problem.

In this category, women described ordinary conversations and situations being turned into uncomfortable and embarrassing ones by men who made sexual jokes or remarks with double meanings.

Touching

Seventy-seven of the women experienced this kind of harassment. Forty-nine of them described their actual experiences, making this the most discussed problem.

This kind of sexual harassment was described as happening in the following ways:

- Openly, blatantly, and often in front of others.
- Touching that appears accidental.
- Sexual advances made out of sight of other employees.

Supervisors Asking for Dates in Return for Implied Job Benefits or Improvement in the Work Situation

Twelve women had experienced this problem. Some expressed the view that requests for dates from supervisors generally presented problems, even if no promises were made or implied, since refusal always presented the possibility of retaliation.

Supervisors/Bosses Threatening If Sexual Requests Refused

There were six responses that were concerned with "dating" and with physical threat as the result of non-co-operation. It is not possible to describe a pattern of behavior or response since the descriptions are so few, four of "dating" and two of physical threat.

EFFECTS OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Women who had experienced sexual harassment were asked in the questionnaire to describe their feelings and actions following these incidents, what support they got from others, and what the consequences were.

Feelings

The most prevalent feelings reported by women who experienced incidents of sexual harassment were those of anger and embarrassment. Often these feelings were coupled and women reported feeling "furious and personally degraded." The anger was often very intense and described by one woman as being "almost uncontrollable rage" and "a lingering anger after the rage had subsided."

Methods Used to Deal With Sexual Harassment

Responses of women to sexual harassment ranged from keeping quiet and accepting it—usually out of embarrassment or shyness—to actually aggressively confronting the offender. In many of the cases an assertive response was effective in eliminating the problem, although five of these women reported retaliatory action.

Repercussions

A few women who dealt with the harassment in an assertive manner reported that they are now labelled "troublemakers" or made fun of.

Twelve women reported that they are now far more wary of men and nervous on the job and a few say they can no longer bear to face the offender.

Seven women reported that their behavior had changed; they had become "colder," more "unnatural," "no longer laughed or smiled," were very conscious of the way they dressed and kept themselves.

Fifteen women told of being fired or denied promotion for reacting against sexual harassment—one of whom has been unable to find work elsewhere. Six women quit their jobs rather than put up with sexual harassment.

THE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM

Some people feel that at least some aspects of what is called sexual harassment are hard to distinguish from the "normal or flirtatious" aspects of relationships between the sexes. For those women planning the study, and for those responding to the questionnaire, however, the distinction between sexual harassment and mutually desired relationships between men and women in the workplace was the matter of choice. In the actual accounts that women gave of incidents that had happened to them, the common feature was the lack of choice or control in the situation. In all cases, the behavior was unwelcomed and unwanted.

It is this aspect of the situation, this failure to recognize the woman's rights and autonomy, that constitutes offense.

The situation is one of glaring inequality. Occasional comments were made about women harassing men in return for benefits, but the extent to which women initiate this kind of behavior is not at all in proportion, and is not constituted in our society as being acceptable.

RUNNING SCARED???

"The insurance industry has recognized sexual harassment in the workplace with its ensuing lawsuits to be an increasing problem for business. Therefore, we of Complete Equity Markets, Inc. have created Sexual Harassment Defense Insurance to cover this new exposure."

Complete Equity Markets, Inc.—Lloyd's, London Correspondents