Tackling Sexual Harassment in Formal Employment
Perspectives, Responses and Lessons

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Workplace sexual harassment encompasses a spectrum of inappropriate behaviors that carry implicit or explicit sexual connotations targeted at women's bodies. Typically perpetrated by men, this misconduct arises from imbalances in power and gender dynamics. It spans from verbal comments to physical touching, unwelcome sexual advances, and even egregious acts like assault and rape. The impact of workplace sexual harassment is profoundly detrimental, causing both physical and mental health repercussions for women while also detrimentally affecting a company's productivity. While the true extent of this issue remains difficult to ascertain due to challenges in documenting the experiences of victims, existing research on sexual harassment strongly indicates its widespread presence in contemporary India. Despite the presence of legal frameworks such as Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act (2013), it is important to recognize that sexual harassment is often a result of a complex interaction of social factors and this necessitates using strategies that challenge gender norms in the workplace itself. This article aims to discuss some approaches that have been tested in corporate cultures in developed countries, and what has worked and not worked for them.

The Trouble with Harassment Training

Can harassment training, which focuses on prohibited behaviors, effectively reduce instances of harassment? Apparently not. Research indicates that such training may inadvertently reinforce gender stereotypes. This training often portrays men as dominant and driven by sexual desire, while portraying women as vulnerable. Unfortunately, this portrayal can leave women feeling less confident and empowered in the workplace and this effect has been observed in various training programs. There are other issues about

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how the training is delivered as well. Typically, it's mandatory, sending the message that men need to be compelled to pay attention to the issue. Moreover, it primarily focuses on what not to do, delving into the specifics, which suggests that men are unaware of where the boundaries lie. Essentially, the message conveyed is that men require correction.

When you initiate any training by essentially labeling a group as the problem, it tends to provoke a defensive response. Subsequently, individuals become less inclined to be part of the solution and may instead resist. This is precisely what transpires with harassment training. Research demonstrates that it can make men more likely to shift blame onto victims and perceive women who report harassment as exaggerating or fabricating their experiences.

Further research has revealed that training which frames individuals in a legal context, categorizing them as either harassers or victims, often leads those undergoing the training to reject it, as they don't believe these labels apply to them. This is known as an "identity threat reaction." Essentially, this implies that training is least effective for individuals who associate masculinity with power. In simpler terms, those who are more likely to engage in harassment may be the least receptive to such training.

Bystander-Intervention Training

If the typical harassment training doesn't ensure positive effects, it's probably time to start thinking about other strategies. One such method that has shown some early promising results is bystander intervention training. This represents the most promising alternative in recent literature, and researchers in North America have conducted intriguing experiments with it, particularly on college campuses and military installations where harassment and assault are prevalent. In these programs, they commence with the premise that trainees are allies actively engaged in addressing the issues of harassment and assault, rather than potential wrongdoers. The collective responsibility is to intercept and address misconduct at its early stages—a "if you see something, say (or do) something" approach.

Remarkably, this approach has proven highly effective. Students and soldiers who have participated in bystander training consistently report that it equips them with the knowledge of how to respond when they observe signs of a problem. What's most significant is that even months after the training, those who have undergone it are markedly more inclined than others to report their involvement in real-life situations. This approach empowers everyone in the workplace to combat harassment, avoiding the undesirable dichotomy of assigning people the roles of harasser or victim.

Trainers offer a range of choices for bystanders on how to act. They generally discourage immediate confrontation with the harasser, as it can escalate the situation and place the bystander at risk. Instead, if they feel comfortable, bystanders can employ tactics such as calmly stating, "That joke wasn't funny." Another option involves disrupting the situation, like creating a distraction by loudly dropping a book. Observers can engage the harasser in conversation later, asking questions without making accusations, such as, "were you aware of how your words came across in that conversation?" Researchers also suggest fostering open dialogue about inappropriate behavior, encouraging colleagues to ask questions like, "did anyone else notice that? Am I the only one who interpreted it this way?" An essential element, as researchers emphasize, is for bystanders to engage with the targets of harassment. These individuals often feel isolated, and bystanders may not be aware of whether the interaction was consensual or intended as a joke. Colleagues can express concern by saying, "I noticed what happened. Are you okay with that?" Since many victims tend to blame themselves, a bystander reassuring them with, "this isn't your fault; you did nothing wrong," can be immensely meaningful.

While bystanders may not be present during the most egregious offenses, harassers frequently test the waters with inappropriate comments or actions. A healthy workplace culture intervenes before these offenses escalate.

Manager Training

Training exclusively tailored for managers also proves highly effective. According to one study, companies that implemented specialized manager-training programs experienced substantial increases in the representation of women in managerial roles, and research has consistently shown that firms with more women in management report fewer instances of sexual harassment. This can be attributed, in part, to the fact that harassment tends to thrive in environments where men hold positions of power while women do not, creating a situation where men may feel compelled to tolerate sexualized behavior from their male peers. Moreover, research indicates that addressing harassment also contributes to the reduction of gender inequality through practices such as equitable pay and promotions for both men and women and the inclusion of both genders on diverse teams.

Managerial training's effectiveness lies in its approach of framing harassment as a challenge that all managers must confront. In this regard, it shares similarities with bystander training. Both male and female participants are encouraged to envision situations where they might witness others engaging in inappropriate behavior, with the primary focus intentionally placed on recognizing and addressing

misconduct observed in others, rather than on potential wrongdoings of their own. Trainers provide guidance on identifying early indicators of harassment and how to promptly and effectively intervene to prevent its escalation. Research demonstrates that men are attentive participants in manager training. This can be attributed in part to the fact that the training portrays them as potential champions rather than culprits, fostering a sense of collective responsibility where everyone learns how to identify and mitigate questionable behaviors, thereby enhancing the overall workplace environment.

Encouraging Civility

A challenge with conventional training, as pointed out by researchers, is that it instructs individuals on what they should avoid but is silent on what they should do. Civility training aims to bridge this gap. The training commences by encouraging participants to generate a list of behaviors that reflect respect and courtesy. These behaviors, while they may seem inconsequential, are not practiced frequently enough. Examples include acknowledging and praising good work, refraining from interrupting others, and avoiding multitasking during conversations. A significant aspect of civility training is highlighting the contributions of individuals who are often marginalized. For instance, someone might say, "She just presented that idea. Would she like to elaborate on it?" Importantly, it may involve discussions on how to provide and receive constructive feedback regarding impolite conduct, enabling timely resolution. Moreover, it educates supervisors on effective listening when handling complaints, without displaying dismissiveness.

Way Forward

In conclusion, research indicates that addressing the issue of harassment cannot be effectively resolved by categorizing all men as potential harassers in training sessions. Instead, the most beneficial approach involves developing training programs that treat all employees as allies of potential victims and equip them with problem-solving skills. While strong legal frameworks and mechanisms for addressing grievances are essential in workplaces, ultimately, altering corporate cultures is imperative to engage a larger number of individuals in addressing this issue. Additionally, increasing the representation of women in managerial and executive positions can be beneficial. Women are generally more receptive to training and more likely to believe individuals who come forward with complaints. This, in turn, may encourage victims to report incidents and enhance the likelihood of a satisfactory resolution during the complaint process.

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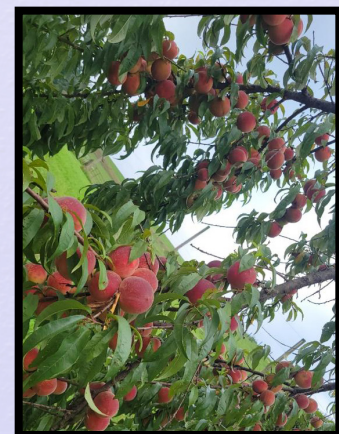
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