

Male sexual harassment is not a joke

We often talk about sexual harassment against women in the workplace but for this column I'm going to address the growing problem of sexual harassment against men in the workplace.

Are you laughing? You probably are. That's what happened recently when I discussed the topic with friends and colleagues. Few seem to take this issue seriously.

But for quite a few men, sexual harassment is indeed becoming a serious issue, and some men are deciding not to just brush aside the unwelcome advances from women and men.

"Many people mistakenly believe that harassment is limited to females," says Roberta Chinsky Matuson, a human resource expert. "The truth is that this type of experience is just as damaging to men."

While the number of sexual harassment cases overall has consistently declined in the past few years, "sexual harassment filings by men have consistently increased, doubling over 15 years," says David Grinberg, a spokesman for the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, or EEOC.

Even though women filing charges makes up the bulk of the EEOC's sexual harassment workload, men are becoming a bigger piece of the pie, with nearly 2000 filing charges last year.

And that's cases that get to the EEOC. Many labor experts say men are less likely than women to speak up about such cases of harassment for fear of being mocked by coworkers, and even fewer would take the charges to a government agency and risk widespread knowledge of their plight.

Thomas, who works in academia but didn't want his full name used, found himself in an office made up of mainly women who would routinely share and copy each other emailed jokes and emails about men. A few, he adds, "made fun of men's unique anatomy, if you know what I mean." The behavior, he says, made him feel isolated. When he finally addressed the matter with the women in the office, "the women were stunned, generally with a 'You've got to be kidding,' kind of attitude. And they kept doing it."

There are a host of reasons the number of men complaining about harassment may be up.

There are more female bosses in the workplace today than there were just 10 years ago; and unfortunately men don't have a corner on the rude-behavior market.

Also, a ruling by the Supreme Court in 1998 involving a Louisiana man who claimed he was sexually harassed by his male manager while working on an oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico, made it clear that men are protected from such harassment at work under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

The first ever court case involving sexual harassment of a man in the workplace was in 1995. The EEOC sued Domino Pizza after a female supervisor of a male store manager sexually harassed him and then fired him. "She would caress his shoulders and neck, and pinched his buttocks," the EEOC said in a statement.

The case went to trial in Tampa and the male manager was awarded \$237,000 in damages.

Last year, the EEOC filed a lawsuit against a Mississippi real estate company on behalf of a man who they say was "sexually harassed and retaliated against by his female manager." The agency said the man, a maintenance worker in an apartment complex, rebuffed sexual advances from his female manager. As a result, she began a "pattern of retaliation against him, culminating in his firing."

And just this past February, a federal jury granted a \$225,000 verdict to three men who said their manager at an Oxford, Miss., construction company sexually harassed them.

The three male employees were truck drivers and they all complained about one manager whose behavior included "sexually offensive comments and unwanted physical contact."

The EEOC's Birmingham regional attorney C. Emanuel Smith noted in a release about the ruling: "Some employers may view male-on-male harassment as 'horseplay' or 'boys being boys' but this kind of intentional discrimination can cause needless suffering and permanent scars for employees – not to mention creating liability issues for employers who violate federal law."

So hopefully you've all stopped snickering, and realize such claims are definitely serious.

The biggest challenge for men is figuring out what to do when this happens.

Some men, says relationship psychiatrist Paul Dobransky, will deal with the harassment head on and then shrug it off; while others get all tied up in knots and feel stuck. In the latter case, things will only deteriorate and probably lead to more harassment. The key, he adds, “is to set personal boundaries.”

You should first confront the harasser. Tell them clearly and without wavering that you do not appreciate that type of behavior and you want it to stop.

Don't joke around with the individual and don't be wishy-washy, harassers can smell fear.

If it doesn't stop talk to your manager, but if the harasser is your manager, go above his or her head to their supervisor. Your next step if nothing is resolved is the HR office and then the EEOC if you get nowhere with that.

If you're looking for confidentiality, don't hold your breath, says employment attorney Michael Cohen. Once you go beyond the harasser, the company will be forced to investigate the claim and surely your name will end up the talk of the office on IM.

I would be remiss if I didn't address another big issue — bogus sexual harassment claims. Yes, men can make those too.

Not everything is considered sexual harassment under the law. (And I'm saying this to not only men but women as well.) Just because a guy or gal asks you out doesn't mean you've been harassed. And just because someone has a photo you might deem inappropriate on his or her computer, or tells an off-color joke in the office, doesn't mean you should be running to your human resource department.

We've all become quite touchy in the workplace and often take what our colleagues say the wrong way. But remember, we're working in close quarters with a mixed bag of individuals that do and say stuff we might not like.

Let's keep this all in perspective. If a boss asks you out, say “no”. If he or she demotes or fires you, then you've got a serious sexual harassment claim on your hands. If a coworker or coworkers keep inundating you with sexually explicit jokes, photos, etc., and continue to do it even when you ask them to stop, you may have a case as well if you can prove they created a hostile environment for you.

Taking your case all the way to the EEOC, or even to HR isn't the best option for everyone. If things don't change at your job, you can always choose to move on. A place with that kind of attitude is probably bad career karma anyway.

After approaching his harassing coworkers, Thomas spoke to his bosses and someone was brought in to intercede, but no one was formally disciplined. Some behaviors ceased but others did not. “Resentment in all directions festered and over the course of a couple of years the events really blew apart the office, and most everyone was working elsewhere within a couple of years,” he adds, including himself. “I’ve moved on with a very successful career.”

Questions:

1. How do you define sexual harassment?
2. Before you read about this article, have you ever thought that male can be harassed too?
3. Do you agree male harassment is easier to handle than female harassment? Why or why not?
4. Most of people think women are more likely to suffer from sexual harassment. What do you think about it?
5. If you were an official or an authority person, how can you deal with this problem? What policies will you make or campaign will you launch to avoid the phenomenon?
6. What places or situations are more likely to happen this kind of tragedies?
7. When you are under the threat of workplace sexual harassment, what will you do? Will you quit the job or keep enduring? And is there any other way to solve the situation?
8. Have you encountered any this kinds of experiences (sexual harassment)? Or have you heard any of them? Please illustrates the situation. And what’s your reaction and solution (or suggestions to help the victim)?
9. If someone you know is suffering from sexual harassment, how can you help he/she? What will you do?
10. How can we protect ourselves from being harassed?

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