

Submission 58

I read about this inquiry in an online article while browsing the Australian news headlines. I am Australian but now based in the US. I am grateful for the opportunity to comment, and although my submission will only be brief, I feel very confident that these sentiments are shared by hundreds if not thousands of other Australian girls and women who have been in similar work place settings to those where I have been employed. I know I have had discussions with several groups of colleagues and girlfriends over the years and stories such as these are not at all uncommon. I hope this will be noted when your Office is reading the submissions.

I trained and worked as a lawyer in both private law practice and a national government owned corporation. I also worked in retail and hospitality as a high school and university student. These experiences are from 1998 to 2013 and reflect my time at these workplaces.

In a nutshell, I witnessed and experienced varying degrees of sexual harassment in each setting. Those work places where this occurred more frequently than others seem to share the same characteristics in that there were often a more powerful group of males in leadership with often much younger females in lower level positions. A lot of this also came down to the personalities of those males in some of those settings - i.e. predatory - and the willingness of the CEO/other senior leadership, to turn a blind eye to such inappropriate behavior. I believe it was this turning of the blind eye which led to a culture which almost accepted and legitimized these inappropriate behaviors.

While HR and managers can only protect their employees so far, I do believe that the lack of recognition of sexual harassment laws and the right to be free from such harassment at work needs to be given MUCH more attention. As this is a broader cultural issue, perhaps this advocacy should be occurring in non-work place settings such as through media and other channels. I do not remember ever receiving any warnings at high school (when many young women start casual jobs) or at university regarding sexual harassment awareness, what it is, how prevalent it is and what to do about this. I know my sisters and my mother who are all across different generations have experiences similar to mine so this topic has been around for many decades.

Regarding technology, while work place emails and personal cell numbers are now often shared with ease among hundreds if not thousands of other employees and the general public, this provides very easy 'access' for employees to be targeted by harassers. I think HR and workplaces should consider how much personal data is shared and made publicly available. Anyone paid on the company dime or sending communications related to work that they are paid for (as expert advisors or consultants) should be subject to the same codes regarding communication.

I think workplace characteristics that are more likely to give rise to sexual harassment include those where men outnumber women and where there is a lack of regard for the rights of women at senior management, as this sends a blasé attitude down the line. I also think managers might like to inquire with their staff as to the level of safety and

comfort that they feel, particularly those younger and more vulnerable women in these situations. I think the requirement to keep individual salary information confidential also stifles the ability of women in a work place to learn what their male counterparts are earning (in my last annual performance review in Australia around 2012/13, I was specifically told by our CFO to not tell anyone else what my salary now was, so when several members of our legal team - all female - learned the most junior IT consultants were earning significantly more than us we felt this very unfair).

I also think the associations between government agencies and consulting companies, and the connections between why some are hired (old university buddies?!) should also be considered and more transparency required. The hiring of consultants and embedding them into workplaces seemed to give the consultants, who were not employees, and were not in any reporting relationships with employees, an unfair power advantage and this was sometimes used against women (and other male employees) inappropriately. Of course this is a generalization but I witnessed this several times and I know this also made other employees I worked with uncomfortable as they were not familiar with where they truly stood in relation to these people - i.e. they were more vulnerable.

I could probably write pages of examples that my girlfriends and I have all experienced by our male 'colleagues'. They range from an expectation of making the tea and coffee for meetings, doing the photocopying or cleaning up after a meeting - despite having the same credentials of males our same age/experience level also in the room, to the likes of being repeatedly propositioned by people you may not be interested in, having your body size and dress style commented upon, being talked over in meetings and ultimately not being paid the same amount as male work-mates.

I take this opportunity to write because these experiences have all occurred in the past 15 years and my girlfriends and I are fortunately all very well educated (most with law degrees ourselves) and I feel know how to stand up for ourselves, yet once you enter these male dominated work place settings, you realize those things don't mean that much. Women who do not have the fortune of the education or support systems that I was lucky to have, must experience greater harassment due to their vulnerability. I absolutely regret not standing up for myself in a stronger fashion, or for the rights of the women and men I worked with who experienced harassment. But, I realize that I am not responsible for the actions of others and the responsibility falls on the feet of those at the top and the culture they create and allow to continue. My direct bosses were always female, but their bosses were always male and each place I worked had a male CEO/director. Perhaps highlighting a path for mid-level female managers to head into senior management and ensure that cultures become more respectful of women's rights might be a step in the right direction. I also think annual anonymous surveys in work places where employees can honestly communicate their experiences which is read by senior staff should occur so such behaviors can be recognized and acted upon with those individuals.

I would also like to comment on the experiences I have had in the US - while I have only worked in an academic setting - I have witnessed such a marked decrease in sexual

harassment. I also don't hear stories from female colleagues similar to those I have heard from Australian colleagues. I do think this is because the broader culture in relation to women's rights seems to be given a little more attention over here. I think Australia has a long way to go and I hope this survey and work of other organizations and work places can assist...

Many thanks for the opportunity to comment and your consideration of my submission.