

Female managers face more sexual harassment

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Women in positions of power targeted more often than the rank-and-file

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Ellen worked in the male-dominated world of television ad sales for a decade without experiencing much sexual harassment. But things changed when she started to climb the ladder.

Ellen, who lives in San Francisco but did not want her full name used, says her male colleagues and even her superiors started talking about their sexual experiences in graphic detail when she was around and made lewd comments that made her uncomfortable enough to complain to her human resource department.

“I was being harassed. I was being undermined,” she explains. “I think they were intimidated by me, and this was the only way to get power back.”

Thomasina Tafur, who runs a consulting firm in Memphis, Tenn., experienced a similar phenomenon when she rose up the corporate ranks at a major transportation company. One colleague would make over-the-top comments in a room full of managers about how good she looked.

“The higher you were, the more of a power trip it became for men, and sometimes I thought they were not even aware of what they said,” she says.

Female managers are 137 percent more likely to experience sexual harassment than their rank-and-file counterparts, according to a recently released study.

Even Heather McLaughlin, a sociologist at the University of Minnesota and the primary investigator on the study, was surprised by the findings.

“It’s sort of a paradox,” she says. “You would expect that having that status and power over other employees would protect you from that behavior.”

Turns out it doesn’t, and McLaughlin’s conclusion is that “because of gender norms, people are still not accepting women in power positions.”

The report, “A Longitudinal Analysis of Gender, Power and Sexual Harassment in Young Adulthood,” looked at data that tracked nearly 600 individuals from adolescents into their 30s.

Undermining authority

The women in the study reported that men were not sexually harassing them because they wanted a relationship with them, McLaughlin says. “It was more about proving themselves,” she says about the harassers.

Among the women in the study, many believed the harassment they encountered was all about undermining their authority.

One female named Holly, who was a participant in the research, was the first woman manager at her company, and she reported that her subordinates would sometimes joke that: “If we had somebody with balls in this position we’d be getting things done.”

Holly also described a more extreme situation involving a vice president from another firm she encountered at a company event. He tried to “put his arm around me and pull me towards him and, kind of uncomfortable, and I’d push away. And he just kept going on and touching me and put his hand on my leg very forcefully, and then he was playing the game of trying to unhook my bra with two fingers, which he did after I tried to get up and get away once. I went to get up and he put his arm on my shoulders and said, ‘Stay.’ I was really shaking and he kept being excessively persistent with his hand on the leg thing and I sat with my leg crossed away from him, my arms across my body kind of protecting me.”

This type of behavior may lead women to feel subjugated by these men who essentially “strip them of their organizational power,” says McLaughlin.

Power, not sex

The findings of the study were nothing new to many sexual harassment experts.

“Sexual harassment is, and always has been, about power more than it is about sex,” says Kathleen Neville, author of “Internal Affairs: The Abuse of Power, Sexual Harassment, and Hypocrisy in the Workplace.” “What is so difficult and frightening for women who are in management positions and have worked hard to get there is that they are suddenly feeling extremely vulnerable because they find themselves in a situation which might cost them everything.”

When female managers are harassed, they often end up caught in a Catch 22 and tend not to report the behavior because of the stigma that could develop, both personal and professional, explains Neville, who was herself a sexual harassment victim. “They have everything to lose,” she says, because they want to make sure they’re perceived as having control over work situations and handling conflicts. If they’re running off to human resources to enlist help, people may question a female supervisor’s “ability to handle challenges.”

“If they complain, they’re seen as a complainer,” adds Gabriela Cora, author of “Alpha Female: Leader of a Pack of Bitches — Winning Strategies to Become an Outstanding Leader.” “But if they don’t do anything about it they will continue to be harassed.”

Confronting the issue

There are ways for female managers who face this conundrum to deal with the problem:

Confront it head on. From the moment women feel any sexual harassment, even if it’s slight, they should be firm and very clear with the harasser that that kind of behavior is unacceptable, Cora stresses. If you don’t confront it right away, she adds, the harassment could just escalate.

So, the first time that off-colored joke is told at a meeting or at lunch, she continues, you should convey a message right away, even in front of other colleagues, that “you don’t like to play this way.”

Women managers, she adds, need to show right away that the behavior is unwanted, that they’ve done nothing to deserve it and that they really mean business. “They can’t be wishy washy.”

Broaden your network now. “I suggest that a woman manager should already have developed good, solid relationships within HR managers, be a big supporter of company policies and initiatives, and maintain good professional relationships with those who surround her boss and who he or she reports into,” Neville advises.

Pick your battles. Not every joke in the office or at the plant is meant to undermine a female leader’s authority. As a manager, you should be able to deal with some of the cracks the good old boys’ network — still is the upper echelon of corporate America — is used to, especially if they don’t really make you feel uncomfortable.

“What I’ve seen is women who tend to say they’ve never been harassed carry themselves with a sure and secure personality and can brush off unwanted advances,” she says.

Know when enough is enough. If the harassment just does not subside, be extremely professional about reporting it and document everything, Neville advises. Despite how it might impact your career, she notes, HR departments tend to think charges made by managers are more likely to have merit.

No matter how you handle harassment at work, the key to fighting it is in the courage and determination that got you into a leadership role in the first place.

“Most women in the workplace today need to realize that taking personal responsibility for their own well-being sometimes means using their own power — that very same power they have worked so hard to have, and they can do that by speaking up,” Neville says.

Eve Tahmincioglu writes the [weekly “Your Career” column for msnbc.com](#) and chronicles workplace issues in [her blog, CareerDiva.net](#).

