



THE #METOO MOVEMENT IN THE CORPORATE WORLD: POWER, PRIVILEGE, AND THE PATH FORWARD

Sylvia Ann Hewlett

#MeToo launched a revolution—an indelible and history-making one—but it remains incomplete.

Among its many meaningful and positive contributions, the movement lifted a heavy burden of pain and shame for millions of women. It spearheaded a transformational shift in public opinion, and victims now have a fighting chance of being not only heard, but as importantly, believed. It has stripped power from a great many badly behaved men. It has also reinvigorated efforts on the pay equity front and reinforced moves towards inclusive leadership cultures.

On the not-so-positive side, it has led many well-intentioned men to feel scared about mentoring and sponsoring women. And in much of the media and inside many companies, #MeToo has not yet had a wide-enough tent. There are still many stories to be told: young (more junior) white women are not the only victims. Older (more senior) white men are not the only aggressors. Black men, as well as gay men and women, experience particularly high rates of sexual harassment and assault—and women as well men can be sexual predators.

Data from a recent survey, as well as the scores of interviews I conducted over the past few years, make clear that sexual misconduct in the workplace is primarily about power. My research also shows that there are clear steps that all of us—organizations and individuals, men and women, senior leaders and more junior employees—can take to help make sure that everyone has the opportunity to fulfill their professional potential in a safe, welcoming workplace.

SEXUAL AGGRESSION IN THE WORKPLACE: WHAT THE DATA SAYS

The Center for Talent Innovation (CTI), a New York-based think tank that I founded, fielded a nationally representative survey of 3,213 college educated employees between the ages of 21 and 65 currently working in full-time, white collar jobs. The results showed that sexual harassment (which may include anything from inappropriate emails to stalking) is appallingly common: 34% of women report having been harassed in the workplace at some point in their careers.

Most of these women have been harassed by a man (97%), which is no surprise. Yet some may find it surprising that 13% of men also report having suffered sexual harassment, with most of that harassment (68%) coming from women. Sexual assault (defined as unwanted physical contact ranging from groping to rape) is rarer, but still alarmingly frequent.

If you are in a company with 100 men and 100 women, odds are that seven of your female co-workers and five of your male co-workers have suffered physical, sexual assault in the workplace. Most women (94%) cite a man as the aggressor here, while most men (76%) say that a woman has assaulted them. (The numbers in the figure below add up to more

than 100 percent because some individuals have suffered harassment or assault from both a man and a woman at some point in their careers.)

Before you question how women can sexually harass and assault men—most men are, after all, physically stronger than women—remember that power in the workplace often has little to do with physical strength. If your boss, with power over your career, gropes you or insists on a late-night hotel room visit, you may be afraid to say no or file a complaint, regardless of whether that boss is a man or a woman.

Breaking down the data by race and sexual orientation, gay men and women are particularly common targets. 23% of LGBT men report suffering sexual harassment in the workplace and 9% report assault—making gay men on average more likely to suffer sexual assault at work than heterosexual women. But what LGBT women suffer is off the chart: 43% report sexual harassment at work and 10% report assault. Black men are another frequently targeted group: 21% have experienced sexual harassment at work and 7%—more than 1 in 15—have been sexual assaulted at work.

There are clear steps that all of us can take to help make sure that everyone has the opportunity to fulfill their professional potential in a safe, welcoming workplace.

Consider the case of a recently-retired black publishing executive, Warren Thomas.^[1] In an interview, he told me how at his last employer, a white female executive—who much more junior than he was—regularly sidled up to him at company events. She told him, in a loud whisper that others could hear, that he was a “black stud.” When no one else could see, she plastered herself against him and grabbed his butt.

Time after time, Warren merely stepped away and kept quiet. But he was scared. What would happen if he, a black man, accused a white woman of groping and harassing him? At best, he might become an office joke. At worst, the white woman might turn the tables and say that he was the one harassing or assaulting her.

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Warren finally went to his company's CEO, who agreed to separate the two. But the big boss did not punish the woman in any way. He seemed to view the whole matter as ridiculous. For Warren, it wasn't just embarrassing and anxiety inducing. It felt like an insult to him, happily married for decades. It distracted him from his work. And it made his colleagues look at him strangely.

The case of Warren, as well as of all of these "surprising" data points may become less surprising, when one remembers three key facts:

- Sexual misconduct is largely about power. Those who hold power take advantage of it, and those insecure in their power may seek to demonstrate it on the bodies of others.
- LGBT individuals and people of color are frequently seen by others as either powerless or, as they rise to positions of power, as "having a need to be put in their place."
- Women are now rising to positions of power, but since they are still usually few and far between, they may tend to replicate traditional male forms of displaying power.

"I believe you can't stop sexual aggression without understanding how deeply ingrained it is as an abuse of power," Lara Stemple, a professor at the UCLA School of Law, told me in an interview. "Feminist analysis has taught us that sexual victimization happens when there's an imbalance of power. Often that imbalance comes about when one person is male, and one is female. But power manifests itself in a lot of other ways. Employers and employees, corrections officers and inmates, teachers and students; those are also relationships that exist with an imbalance of power."

None of my “surprising” data points should distract from the fact that the most famous kind of workplace sexual aggression is in fact the most common one: a senior man harassing or assaulting a more junior woman. But I believe that these data points help make the case that the solutions must address the needs of all employees, and that many of the most durable solutions will require making existing power structures more inclusive.

Right now, one especially unfortunate unintended consequence of #MeToo is that, in some cases, it may be making it harder for women to receive the shot at success that they deserve. CTI’s study found that about two in five of men and women agreed that “Recent publicity about sexual harassment at work makes it even less likely that a male leader will sponsor a female protégée even if she deserves it.” In an earlier book, *Forget a Mentor, Find a Sponsor* (Harvard Business Review Press), I quantified the value to protégés of winning a sponsor: female employees with a sponsor are 19 percent more likely to get that next promotion than those without. (For male employees the figure is 20 percent.) So, when men refuse to sponsor high-performing women, from fear of gossip or scandal, they are denying women opportunities that their male peers enjoy.

Fortunately, many companies and corporate leaders are working to stamp out sexual harassment and assault in their ranks, making it safer for all men and women, whatever their identity, background, or place in the hierarchy, to work together. It’s not just good citizenship. When you protect your team from harassment and assault, you are protecting yourself and your organization from scandal and legal liabilities. You are also enabling talented men and women to fulfil their potential with you, rather than seeing them jump ship for a competitor.

MAKING US ALL SAFE—AND INNOVATIVE: #METOO SOLUTIONS

What Companies Can Do

1 | Set a zero-tolerance policy. Every employee, from the CEO to the stockroom clerk, should know that credible evidence of sexual misconduct is grounds for immediate termination—without a lucrative severance package and an innocuous press release that claims that he/she is leaving for personal reasons. A sexual predator should not get rewarded with a comfortable and honorable early retirement. Contracts may make it hard to avoid granting predators golden parachutes, but it's possible.

Zero tolerance requires that everyone be held to the same standards, ones that absolutely and explicitly forbid harassing or assaulting colleagues—and zero tolerance also extends to retaliation over complaints. “We have a very straightforward policy over retaliation,” Diane Gherson, chief human resource officer at IBM, told me. “If there is any, that person gets fired.”

2 | Create a speak-up culture. It can be hard for victims to speak up and demand safety and justice. Many fear indifference, shame, ridicule, or retaliation—and those fears, alas, are all too often justified. It's possible to change that. International Paper's general counsel, Sharon Ryan, explains how. “It's about actualizing respect and making sure that there is no retaliation for speaking up, and that everyone knows that,” she says. That means publicizing that the company has a speak-up culture, with the board of directors backing it up. It means a robust help line. It means swift action when misconduct is revealed, no matter how senior the perpetrator may be.

When senior management is accused, the company should bring in an outside investigator, to ensure a fair judgement. The company should also work to make senior management more diverse. "Let's face it," Ryan says. "Until you have a significant number of women in leadership, you're stuck with trusting men to do the right thing. But a lot of long-tenured men have skeletons in their closets. And a lot of men protect and cover up for other men."

3 | Upgrade reporting and response systems. If an employee reports sexual harassment or assault, many HR departments' top priority has been to avoid a lawsuit—and avoid the need to fire or reassign the 'brilliant jerks' (high-performing executives) who have been accused. This attitude is changing, as awareness grows that sexual misconduct is a business risk, but not every HR officer has gotten the message. As a result, many employees do not trust HR to protect them. That's why companies must offer more than one channel to report misconduct.

IBM, for example, has a safe line called 'Talk it Over.' Diane Gherson explains: 'You tell your story, confidentially, without having to give your name, but at the end, the professional on the other end will say, "If you want me to take this forward, I'm going to need to use names, but here's how I'll use them. Here's who will know."'

What Individuals Can Do

The main task for individuals is to protect their teams from misconduct and a hostile workplace atmosphere—and to protect themselves from possible malicious gossip and even slander, while giving young women and men of all kinds the opportunities and attention they deserve.

1 | Don't meet in bars, hotel rooms, or apartments. Harvey Weinstein had a habit of calling young women for 'business meetings' in hotel rooms, where he then groped or raped them. Presuming that you are not a predator, why create a situation where others may gossip, and the other person involved may feel uncomfortable?

Instead, hold your meetings in an office with an open door, or a local coffee shop, or any other setting that lends itself to transparency. If you and a colleague are travelling together on business, don't hold your late-night prep for the next morning's presentation in your hotel room or a bar. Have it in a safe zone: the hotel lobby, or one of the conference rooms or business centers that every major hotel has.

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Mark Hanson, a senior vice president at Freddie Mac, told me where he deepens relationships with protégés, male and female. “The company cafeteria,” he says, “that’s where I meet them just to understand a little bit better about where they’re coming from and what they’re seeing. People don’t interrupt and the phone isn’t there. Breakfast, lunch, even coffee, it’s all good.”

To avoid favoritism, you will need to avoid late night one-on-one meetings in hotel rooms and bars with both genders: you cannot stay up late at a corner table with John, but not with Joan, or vice versa.

2 | Be public about your protégés. If you’re a senior manager taking on a prospective protégé, make sure everyone sees what you are doing and why. It’s not just a matter of avoiding misunderstandings, it’s a matter of creating understanding. Put that junior person in front of colleagues, so they too can see their value and why you’re advocating for him or her.

In 2016, Tiger Tyagarajan, CEO of professional services giant Genpact, brought in a much younger, attractive young woman, Katie Stein, to be the firm’s new chief strategy officer. He then put her in the most public position possible: He assigned her to present the company’s strategic plan at its annual investors’ day, in front of Genpact’s board and most important investors. As Tyagarajan recalls it, “After she spoke, one of our biggest investors came up to me and said, ‘Where’d you find her? She was great!’ He was closely followed by my chairman who said, “She did a fabulous job.”

When a top shareholder and your chairman spontaneously compliment your hire, you can rest assured that no one is whispering about either of you behind your backs.

3 | Be an inclusive leader. A Center for Talent Innovation report, *Innovation, Diversity, and Market Growth* pinpointed six key behaviors that make for inclusive leadership: seeking out and valuing different perspectives; showing informed empathy; encouraging and enabling risk taking; giving actionable feedback; conferring authority; and sharing credit. These six behaviors help create workplaces that enable men and women to work together in harmony, speak up freely, and advance according to their merits. That kind of workplace leads not just to a reduction in legal, financial, reputational, and talent retention risks in the #MeToo era. It also provides benefits for innovation and new market growth.

CTI data shows that employees (whether male or female) on teams with inclusive leaders are more likely, compared to employees on teams without inclusive leaders, to feel

- welcome and included (87% vs 51%)
- free to express views and opinions (87% vs 46%)
- confident that their ideas are not only heard but valued (74% vs 37%)

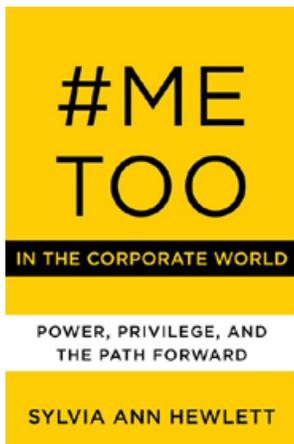
If you feel welcome, and if you feel free to speak up, confidence that your ideas will be listened to and respected, then you are clearly working in a team where sexual misconduct is rare. You are also likely working in a team where innovative ideas bubble up, with men and women of every background eager to contribute to productivity and growth.

LOOKING FORWARD

Sexual misconduct in the workplace affects women and men of every color, background, and orientation. But there are actions you can take to protect yourself and those around you. The first is understanding that sexual misconduct at work is often but not always about old powerful men and young pretty women. **What it is always about is power. Steps to assure that those with less power can work in safety will benefit everyone.** 📖



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Award-winning author Sylvia Ann Hewlett is an economist and the CEO of Hewlett Consulting Partners. She is also the founder and Chair Emeritus of the Center for Talent Innovation. The author of 14 critically acclaimed books, including *When the Bough Breaks* (which won a Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Book Award), *Executive Presence* (an Amazon Best Book of the Month) and *The Sponsor Effect* (a *FT* Business Book of the Month), she has appeared on *60 Minutes*, *Morning Joe*, the *Today Show*—and has been lampooned on *Saturday Night Live*—and has taught at Cambridge, Columbia and Princeton Universities. A graduate of Cambridge University, Hewlett won a Kennedy Fellowship to Harvard University, and earned her PhD in economics at London University. She lives in New York City.

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