

# The Mary MacPherson Essay Prize

## Assessment Piece

### As Things Stand on Sexual Harassment in the Workplace

Your average office is filled with what? Jarring lights and computer screens. Lukewarm teas. Banter. Workplace friendships formed out of necessity: getting through a fifty-hour working week alone is a pretty dire prospect. You know what else it's filled with? Sexual harassment. An estimated 40% of women in the workplace will experience sexual harassment throughout the course of their career. Whether you're the victim or the perpetrator, the bottom line is that, despite #MeToo, sexual harassment is still prevalent in the workplace.

Speaking on a podcast, *Women at Work*, Marianne Cooper, a publisher of the annual *Women in the Workplace* report, says that giving people data about a social problem will not necessarily change behaviour. Bearing that in mind, I'm not here to hurl jarring stats in your direction, but to demonstrate that change will only come about when we create a work culture that strives to tackle the root causes of workplace harassment.

Sexual harassment is not exclusive to women. The *Sunday Times Magazine* published an article recently discussing what Sylvia Ann Hewlett coined #MenToo. In moving forward with the conversation surrounding sexual harassment, it is important to acknowledge that no one is safe. An often forgotten 20% of men report having been harassed at work, and usually by female colleagues. The obvious solution is that managers start to facilitate more conversations so as to educate both men and women. As idealistic as it sounds, we may eventually band together, pushing for an alteration to the inadequate definition of harassment as any behaviour with a sexual motive that makes one feel 'intimidated, degraded, humiliated or offended'.

This vague definition of sexual harassment is perhaps why #MeToo hasn't resonated in the corporate world. Cooper describes this as a 'real disconnect between what is alive and well in our culture and in our society and then what is happening on the ground, inside organisations'. Sexual harassment isn't even a criminal offence in the UK, and so we've ended up with a work culture where it can be trivialised. The loose definition gives the manager who is simply not bothered to engage with a grievance process some wriggle room, room for subjectivity. Individual organisations need to start implementing their own definitions of harassment where the law is failing their staff, and they need to, above all else, hold their staff accountable for their actions – whether they are committing the offence or complicit in it.

Martin Daubney wrote 'Well done, Feminism. Now Men are Afraid to Help Women at Work', for *The Telegraph* in 2015. In the wake of #MeToo, I don't think the Jameela Jamils of Twitter would stand by and let that article go unacknowledged if it was published today. The platforming of feminist celebrities on social media is a move in the right direction. However, it is often the case that the media and celebrity Twitter

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accounts will highlight the pay gaps existing between already immensely privileged actresses and actors. This does not relate to the average nine-to-five. This disconnect between extremely privileged women and the everyday woman sounds harmless on Twitter, but when the pay gap in corporate Britain is double what it is in the hub of the media world, you begin to see that something is fundamentally wrong with the direction that celebrity activism is going in.

I experienced this disconnect first-hand in April of 2019. I was on a hiatus from university until September and getting a job with a prestigious language school felt like a beacon of hope coming my way. When a man on my team began to compliment me excessively, graze my thigh, my lower back, touch my arm, I became uncomfortable. Then he started to play with my hair and text me late at night. Naturally, none of this boded very well with me, but I was new, he had been there for years, and I didn't know what to do because my workplace had never equipped me with the information I needed to report. It took going out to drinks with the whole office one Friday, and him spiking my drink, for me to say anything. At that, I didn't even mention the spiking. Was it relevant? Was I wrong to think work should support me?

I told my line manager, and when he smirked towards the end of what felt like my confession, and said 'Yeah, we all thought something was up', I wanted to scream in his face 'Why didn't you do something before it got to this?'. I now realise that this wasn't just my mess to clean up, my manager's complacent attitude was negligent. If only the organisation had trained him up on dealing with these situations, then he may have handled it more professionally.

The Human Resources officer told me that they understood how hard it must be, but that they couldn't just penalise the perpetrator without asking everyone in the office what they had seen of our interactions. What the HR officer failed to tell me was that this man had a track record of this kind of behaviour. I was the third colleague he'd targeted, but it took several more months of office gossip for me to find this out.

I didn't report, because the organisation, not the harassment, had left me too weak. It felt like nothing would come from reporting, other than an assassination of my character, as I was told it was highly unlikely that he'd lose his position. I felt very isolated through all this. I started to feel like it was my fault. But if the organisation had been more supportive, I may have felt more empowered to report, less victimised.

When a workplace has vague guidelines in place, and never mentions the words 'sexual harassment' until there's an incident, it inevitably creates an environment where harassment can flourish more easily than in a more monitored organisation where POSH (prevention of sexual harassment) is utilised.

When writing this article, I contacted the manager of the department that I had worked in, to find out if the organisation had implemented any changes since I'd left, given the rampant harassment spree their employee had gone on. I was told that the

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organisation couldn't comment on my specific case, but that they operate within the legal framework. I took this to mean that they haven't set their own guidelines. When this happens to the next man or woman, they'll most likely leave the victim, once again, alone to deal with the humiliation of being harassed. The fact that we aren't pushing for more workplaces to implement their own regulations and train their own staff, on an issue that is affecting roughly a third of the workforce, is ludicrous. When harassment happens on the organisation's grounds, during the organisation's working hours, right under the noses of managers, it is most definitely the organisation's problem. It's no wonder that 71% of harassment victims don't report. There's nothing but shame in it for us.

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