Motivational Factors That Keep Women Silent About Sexual Harassment

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ABSTRACT: Sexual harassment has increased over the last three decades as greater numbers of women in the workforce have challenged traditional societal roles for females. It is pervasive, well documented, and predominantly endured by females. Yet, despite the publicity given to sexual harassment, it remains hidden by most of its victims in our society. The most common response to sexual harassment is avoidance and appeasement of the perpetrator without direct confrontation. Most women use these types of emotion-focused coping strategies in an attempt to handle the situation on their own, because they believe that it is their responsibility. This belief is based on society's traditional expectations of gender roles. This paper explores some of the complexities of sexual harassment such as the roots of its existence and its various definitions. The paper also underlines cultural attitudes toward gender roles which result in obstacles to the reporting of abuse.

Sexual harassment is complex, prevalent, and problematic for one out of two women at some point during their working lives (Gutek, 1985). Sexual harassment has increased over the last three decades as greater numbers of women in the workforce have challenged traditional societal roles for females. The debates over its existence have now quieted, as most agree that it is indeed present in workplaces and college campuses. The humiliation that women suffer when obscenities are directed at them can be agonizing. Indeed, if required to work in a threatening or hostile environment, women often demonstrate diminished job performance. Yet, regardless of all its publicity, sexual harassment still remains hidden by most of its victims in our society (Hotelling, 1991). The question of what constitutes specific activities of sexual harassment, however, continues to be formally debated in human resource offices and courtrooms, as well as informally in break rooms and living rooms. Sexual harassment is pervasive and well documented (e.g. Fitzgerald, Shullman, Bailey, Richards, Swecker, Gold, Ormerod, & Weitzman, 1988; Brooks & Perot, 1991; Terpstra & Cook, 1985). However, the fact that it is not reported as frequently as it occurs says that it is still shielded by the silence of its victims (Fitzgerald et al., 1988). Because sexual harassment is endured predominantly by women (Terpstra & Cook, 1985), the remainder of this paper assumes that women are victims and men are perpetrators. The intention, then, is to understand some of the complexities of sexual harassment, such as the roots of its existence and its various definitions. It will also underline cultural attitudes toward gender roles which result in obstacles to the reporting of abuse, and which affect victim responses.

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Folkman and Lazarus' (1985) Ways of Coping Checklist defines emotion-focused coping as a method of dealing with the emotional effects of a problem without changing the causal situation. Problem-focused coping is defined as an attempt to analyze the problem and determine its best solution. Research has shown that most women use emotion-focused coping mechanisms which are distancing and escape-based, instead of problem-focused coping mechanisms (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985) when trying to handle the problem of sexual harassment. There are many underlying factors which motivate women to remain victims of sexual harassment and to use emotion-focused coping devices more often than problem-focused ones.

Societal attitudes toward the victims and perpetrators of sexual harassment has had a profound effect on its prevalence. To address this issue, it is necessary to examine the historical background of societal gender roles and the pressure to conform which society places on many of its members. Society defines certain behaviors for men and women as culturally acceptable and unacceptable. The idea that men belong "out in public" (the public sphere) and women should stay "in the home" (the private sphere) was the norm before 1920 (Hymowitz & Weissman, 1978; Tobias, 1997). Two historians, Hymowitz and Weissman, explain the course of women's emergence from the private sphere of their homes in North American society. Since the debate on slavery began, women have attempted to forge their way into the public sphere. Initially women challenged only slavery. However, these female abolitionists began to realize that they too had been deprived of their rights as human beings. The slavery and women's rights issues were the incentives that women needed in order to begin speaking out for civil rights for everyone. Not long afterward, the Industrial Revolution created a need for a labor force outside of agriculture. By the end of the nineteenth century, the textile industry became one of the first to welcome women to its payroll. However, job categories and wages were sex segregated. Women were hired only for the most unskilled jobs with the lowest pay, while men held the skilled positions. Women's low working rank reflected the pervasive belief that their true vocation was homemaking.

The domestic ideal for women was seen as a cultural symbol which assigned female wage earners to a second-class standing in economic life. World War II forced the issue of women working outside the home further, as men were not available to contribute to the labor force. Women took over their jobs and demonstrated that their abilities were equal.

After the war, society pushed hard to put women back into the home and privileged returning veterans with jobs previously held by women. Societal propaganda encouraged and supported men as the sole supporters of their families and told women who wanted careers that it would damage the male self-esteem. Many women returned to homemaking, but others remained in the workplace. Some stayed out of necessity and others out of ambition. Then came the 1960s. The domestic image for women was so deeply ingrained that, although 40 percent of American women held full-time jobs outside the home, women were still generally defined only as wives and mothers. After years of holding menial jobs and receiving lower pay for the same work, women demanded equal opportunity and pay equity in the workplace. With the 1980s, more women had penetrated the professional sphere and entered semi-professional fields, service industries and jobs once dominated by men (Hymowitz & Weissman, 1978). By 1990, 58 percent of American women were in the labor force (Woloch, 1994). However, societal attitudes had not shifted enough to accommodate the influx of women in previously declared male jobs. Today, though more women are the sole supporters of their families than ever before (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1996), the social attitudes remain. Many facets of society still adhere to the notion that men are the main providers and that most women work only for additional family income. This stance preserves the lower pay scales in female-held jobs. Prevalent societal attitudes are reflected in the general lack of concern for adequate child care, affordable family medical insurance, and good paying jobs for working single mothers. The predominant attitudes center on the belief that women are taking away men's jobs, and men fear that their pay scales will decrease with women now working alongside them. Thus, when women enter a male-dominated work area, they are often met with derision and disdain that challenges their presence and is expressed in a demeaning sexual event now defined as "sexual harassment."

The definition of sexual harassment is still under debate in literature, policies, and procedures. Walker, Erickson and Woolsey (1985) have suggested that the definition must recognize that sexual harassment occurs between people who have unequal power and that the person with less power is exploited. This clarifies that sexual harassment is separate from exclusively sexual issues. Brandenburg (1997) agrees that sexual harassment frequently involves the exploitation of a power relationship and that it is a socioculturally determined behavior. Crocker (1983) also sees that an effective definition will acknowledge that the problem occurs within a social context. Some researchers describe sexual harassment as an abuse of power, a tactic to devalue women's role in the workplace (Tangri, Burt, & Johnson, 1982). One accepted and yet still very broad definition is in the guideline developed by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). The EEOC (1980) describes two forms of sexual harassment: *quid pro quo* harassment, in which sexual conduct is made a condition of employment; and hostile work environment harassment, in which sexual conduct unreasonably interferes with work performance or creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work environment. The EEOC published further sexual harassment guidelines in 1990 and again in 1993 in an attempt to clarify the previously-existing definition. Generally, the public does not seem to have one definition on which everyone can agree. Frazier, Cochran and Olson (1995) analyzed several different research studies of male and female undergraduates, graduate students, faculty, and staff at college campuses to determine what the "lay definitions" of sexual harassment actually are. Their study suggests that there are certain behaviors that are perceived as sexual harassment by almost everyone. These include *quid pro quo* forms of harassment, such as sexual bribery, sexual propositions and sexual touching. However, coarse language, flirting and staring were generally not considered harassment (Frazier et al., 1995). It seems that a single definition of sexual harassment is elusive at this time. From scholars to the legal system to the lay person, everyone has their own perspective and definition. These variations show the difficulties involved for victims who attempt to report a sexual harassment situation.

Culturally determined attitudes and beliefs have an effect on sexual harassment (Hotelling, 1991). For women of our society, the traditional cultural role is that of the wife and mother. The masculine role is that of family provider, or "breadwinner." The traditional view also holds that wage-earning women should limit their employment to specific "female" jobs such as teachers, nurses and secretaries. These expected roles have become stereotypical ones that infiltrate many areas of life. Our cultural belief system is based on our societal attitudes and its imposed gender roles. Therefore, even if the laws have changed, attitudes and beliefs do not change as readily. Sexual harassment has been defined as "a manifestation of deeply held beliefs, attitudes, feelings and cultural norms" (Brandenburg, 1997, p.39). Brandenburg believes that sexual harassment is closely tied to sex-role attitudes and stereotypes. The attitude that "boys will be boys" as an excuse for lewd behavior, and beliefs that rape victims "asked for it" are examples of social attitudes that affect the way society views sexual harassment.

Progress in changing gender stereotypes has taken a step forward since the second wave of feminism which began in the 1960s. However, most of the changes are on paper. Societal attitudes remain tied to old stereotypical gender roles. Title IX, giving equality to women in education, has been around for 25 years. Yet, our courts are filled with cases claiming nonconformity, especially in the context of athletics. Affirmative action laws, rape laws, and sexual harassment laws have collectively brought women's issues to the attention of our legal system, but our fundamental belief system has not yet caught up with the legal words on paper. Traditional beliefs and attitudes are not open to precipitous change. The rapid legal changes have strained relationships, created communication issues, and made sexual harassment more likely (Brandenburg, 1997). For instance, a male-dominated workplace, combined with traditionally

male-oriented tasks, sustains high levels of sexual harassment (Fitzgerald, Drasgow, Hulin, Gelfand, & Magley, 1997). The socialization of women and men in American society provides a cultural base which permits sexual harassment to occur and society to deny responsibility for it (Dziech & Weiner, 1984). Given these cultural relationships and attitudes present in our society, one can begin to see the inevitable complexity of sexual harassment.

According to Fitzgerald, Swan, and Fischer (1995), reasons for failing to report sexual harassment can be as high in number and as varied in nature as its victims. Dziech and Weiner (1984) suggest that for college students, there are at least two factors which contribute to a woman's choice in reporting harassment. First, there seems to be confusion over what exactly constitutes harassment. As stated previously, its definition cannot be agreed upon because no single definition can be meaningful for all situations and persons involved. Secondly, there is confusion over the uncertain boundaries of relationships, such as masculine-feminine roles and teacher-student roles. Brooks and Perot (1991) and Fitzgerald et al. (1988) agree that another contributing factor is that a woman needs to view the behavior as offensive and serious before she will report sexual harassment. Jensen & Gutek (1982) suggest that if a woman adheres to the traditional gender role beliefs, she will be highly likely to blame other women as well as herself for incidents of sexual harassment, and they suggest that a woman with traditional gender role beliefs believes that it is a woman's responsibility to prevent things from "going too far." Women who believe that it is their fault that things "went too far" may not report incidents of sexual harassment unless they believe that the acts were very offensive and serious. Several studies (Brooks & Perot, 1991; Schneider, 1982; Jensen & Gutek, 1982) have demonstrated the relevance of profeminist attitudes to sexual harassment perspectives. Women with profeminist attitudes were able to identify many different aspects of hostile environments as sexual harassment, not just flagrant sexual proposals. Brooks and Perot (1991) also found that feminists were more likely to label "less serious" offenses as sexual harassment. Other reasons for failing to report sexual harassment are: reluctance to cause problems for the harasser (Jensen & Gutek, 1982), fear of not being believed, hurting one's career, or being shamed and humiliated (Fitzgerald et al., 1988; Gutek, 1985). Although all of these reasons are plausible and likely, the foremost barrier to reporting sexual harassment is fear of reprisal (Fitzgerald et al., 1988; Hotelling, 1991).

One example that illustrates these fears is the sexual harassment claim against Mitsubishi in their Normal, Illinois auto factory. In December of 1994, 29 women filed a federal lawsuit against this company accusing them of fostering a climate conducive to sexual harassment. In April of 1996, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission filed a class-action suit against that same company for 300 women at the same plant. The charge by the EEOC was that "Mitsubishi had tolerated boorish, even terrifying behavior by some 400 men who resented the women's presence" (Annin & McCormick, 1997). The company's first response was to bus 3,000 of its employees to the EEOC office in Chicago to protest the lawsuit. That seemed to support the fact that the Mitsubishi management didn't care about the harassment and they indeed reinforced the fostering climate. Three weeks later, they hired Lynn Martin, the former U.S. Labor Secretary, to recommend changes for the 4,000-employee factory. Ms. Martin began by firing sixteen flagrant offenders and putting stringent policies against sexual harassment behavior in place, including mandatory attendance at anti-harassment classes for workers and supervisors. In addition, supervisors attended courses focusing on prevention discipline and conflict-settling techniques. After several months on the job, Ms. Martin found that attempting to change attitudes and beliefs is an enormous job and one that takes time (Annin & McCormick, 1997). The harassment has only changed from overt public humiliation of women by groups of men to subtler forms that are more difficult to detect by supervisors.

Some women workers interviewed by *Newsweek* investigative reporters believe that not enough has changed. After observing the threats and ostracization suffered by other complainants, many remain fearful and do not report incidents of sexual harassment. In addition, some women feel guilty about accusing family-supporting men who might lose their jobs because of a lawsuit (Annin & McCormick, 1997). Still others have complained only to find themselves in an increasingly hostile environment when harassers do not take their reprimands seriously (Annin & McCormick, 1997). Thus, the Mitsubishi case clearly illustrates the complexity in dealing with sexual harassment in current and explicit examples.

Many women realize that the legal system rarely stands behind victims of sexual harassment. Plaintiffs typically do not do very well in court, according to Terpstra and Baker (1988), who conducted a study in which the relative frequency of sexual harassment charges and the outcomes of dismissal or settlement were assessed. They also investigated the influence of particular variables on these outcomes. Fitzgerald et al. (1995) estimated that only about one percent of victims take legal action, and the fraction of those who win is about one-third (Terpstra & Baker, 1988). Furthermore, those who do win receive small settlements ranging from $100 to $15,000, with $3,234 the mean (Terpstra & Baker, 1988). The study also showed that outcomes favorable to the complainant had three ingredients: the severity of harassment behavior, the presence of witnesses, and management notification. Given that *quid pro quo* harassment usually occurs one-on-one, the presence of witnesses is doubtful. This study also demonstrated that severe behavior was given more weight in these cases than hostile environment. Women who fear questions about their integrity or who have experienced more hostile environment harassment than *quid pro quo* may not even formally accuse their harassers or file a lawsuit. Women are also reluctant to report incidents to management for fear of hurting their own careers. All of these factors play a role in curbing reports of harassment.

Victims' emotional responses to sexual harassment are varied. According to Cammaert (1985) the response of most college victims is to ignore the harassment, perhaps because most students perceive a school campus as safe and that professors would not behave in an unethical manner. Likewise, many women would rather not believe that someone is deliberately trying to hurt them. Dziech & Weiner (1984) report that some women will deny the existence or seriousness of harassment, reacting with

disbelief even to the most blatant acts. Some will feel sympathy toward their harassers, similar to the views described by some of the Mitsubishi victims. Women with traditional sex role beliefs are highly likely to blame themselves for not protecting their sexual purity (Jensen and Gutek, 1982). Another common response is apprehension about reporting incidents, which relates to feelings of powerlessness. If the victims are part of an organization that is intolerant of sexual harassment, they may feel empowered enough to speak directly to the harassers, or, if that does not work, report the behavior to management without fear for themselves. In general, however, the most common response to sexual harassment appears to be avoidance of and attempts to appease the perpetrators without direct confrontation (Schneider, Swan & Fitzgerald, 1997). Coping strategies include: tolerating or denying the harassment and its effects, attempting to forget it, pretending that the behavior is harmless, and blaming oneself (Fitzgerald, Swan & Fischer, 1995). Many women use these emotion-focused coping strategies in order to handle the situation alone because they have been conditioned to believe that it is their responsibility based on traditional role expectations.

Fitzgerald et al. (1995) reviewed research on behavioral responses to sexual harassment. The focus of their review was to determine the implications of "just reporting him" which then gave some explanation as to why most women do not report their harassers. Beginning by reviewing responses to harassment, the researchers classified responses as internal or external. Internally-focused responses included: ignoring the harassment and doing nothing to arrest it (endurance); pretending that the situation was not happening or had no effect (denial); reinterpreting the situation or interpreting the intentions of the harasser as non-negative (retribution); and perceiving the harassment as self-induced (self-blame). Externally-focused responses included: avoidance, used by about 50 percent of employed victims; appeasement, which attempts to put off the harasser without confrontation; and assertive responses, which communicate that the harassment is unwelcome and request that it stop. The most infrequent external response is organizational relief, characterized by notifying a supervisor or filing a formal complaint or lawsuit. Internal responses are victims' attempts to handle the situation by themselves due to fears of retaliation, not being believed, hurting one's career, or reluctance to cause problems for the harasser. The study concluded that victims most often practice avoidance, emphasize the positives, and endure, hoping that the situation will disappear without the embarrassment or retaliation that often accompanies a formal complaint. Those who are inhibited by environmental restrictions may cope solely through internal means, telling themselves that "he really didn't mean it," for example. Women will continue to use these mechanisms, inadvertently perpetuating the problem of sexual harassment, as long as real organizational protection from stigma and retaliation fails to exist (Fitzgerald et al., 1995).

Schneider, Swan, and Fitzgerald (1997) examined sexual harassment experiences, coping responses, and job-related psychological outcomes of 447 female private-sector employees and 300 female university employees. Analysis showed that women who had not been harassed could be distinguished on the basis of both job-related and psychological outcomes from women who had experienced low to high frequencies of harassment. This implies that relatively low-level but frequent types of sexual harassment can have notably negative consequences for women employees. In their study they collected data from two different samples. Sample 1 included 447 female employees of a large private-sector organization, while Sample 2 included 300 female employees of a large university. Each group completed Workplace Environment Surveys. The assessed areas included sexual harassment experiences, work attitudes, work behaviors, job withdrawal, psychological outcomes, general job stress, affective disposition, and harassment attitudes. Their analysis included an appraisal of the relationship between women's harassment experiences and job-related outcomes, as well as their coping mechanisms. 68 percent of the respondents in Sample 1 and 63 percent of those in Sample 2, indicated that they had experienced sexual harassment within the previous 24 months. Approximately 75 percent of the Sample 1 women who had been harassed indicated that they had avoided their harassers or told themselves that it was not important and tolerated the harassment. About 33 percent of these women discussed the problem with a supervisor, but only 14 percent filed a formal complaint. In Sample 2, the majority of women chose to deal with the situation themselves in the same ways as those in Sample 1. Only 17.4 percent of the Sample 2 women who had been harassed chose to talk with a supervisor and only six percent made a formal complaint. As a coping method, most of the women indicated that they tried to avoid the harasser. However, the women also stated that the nature of their work required ongoing interaction. Thus, their avoidance strategies cannot work and the chance of further occurrences is increased (Schneider et al., 1997). This research shows significant implications for the daily functioning of an organization. If women who experience sexual harassment are required to interact with their harassers in order to complete their work, the probability of additional incidents goes up and their avoidance strategy is likely to have a negative impact on their performance in the organization. The prevalent use of avoidance as a coping mechanism is a clear example of the "hidden" aspects of sexual harassment.

After reviewing the available research on sexual harassment, I believe that further investigation is necessary in the area of motivation. Some women are motivated to confront their harassers and file charges despite societal pressures against them. However, the bulk of the existing research shows the difficulties in filing sexual harassment charges. The societal pressures to conform to traditional sex roles, combined with the humiliation which the victims suffer, dissuade many women from fighting what seems to be a losing battle. Yet, the question remains as to how some women do indeed find the strength and motivation to survive such an ordeal. Rather than passively accepting their situations, a small percentage of women are somehow motivated to take action. By reviewing case studies, surveys, questionnaires, court cases and interviews, researchers may be able to gain a better insight into the more powerful motivations of those women who do in fact file charges. By applying the same coping techniques, perhaps more women will feel empowered enough to take action against perpetrators of sexual harassment.

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