

The Continued Prevalence Of Sexual Harassment In Workplaces: Where Do We Go From Here?



Two recent studies out of the United States are sobering reminders that workplaces still have work to do in combatting sexual harassment. Tulane University's *National Study of Sexual Harassment and Assault in the United States* ("Tulane Report") found no significant change in the prevalence of workplace sexual harassment between now and their first study conducted in 2018.¹ Similarly, McKinsey & Company and Lean In's *Women in the Workplace Report 2024* ("WIW Report") found that sexual harassment is as prevalent in today's workplace as it was five years ago.²

As a workplace investigator whose focus is on sexual harassment and sexual assaults, these findings are sadly not surprising but disheartening all the same. Sexual harassment and sexual assault investigations form a significant percentage of the work that we do, and we have seen no signs of that slowing down in the years since the #MeToo movement took off. Typically (though not always) these investigations involve a power differential between the parties, and the behaviour at issue can range from sexualized comments to unwanted sexual touching, including rape.

There were several findings from these reports that resonated with what we see in our investigations. According to the WIW Report, “Younger women, who have much shorter tenures, are just as likely as older women to have experienced some form of sexual harassment over the course of their career—a sign that it is not becoming any less common.”³ The Tulane Report also reported that they found an increase across all forms of sexual harassment and assault for women in the age group of 25-34 years.⁴ We have similarly noted that many of the complainants in our investigations are young women at the beginning of their careers, and/or in junior positions vis-à-vis a male respondent.

The WIW Report found that just as women are more likely to experience sexual harassment than men in the workplace, they are significantly less confident than men in their company’s handling of sexual harassment claims, and senior-level men are the most confident.⁵ In the same vein, it is not unusual for us to hear from female complainants about their reluctance in having come forward with their allegations, based on fear of reprisal or for other reasons such as concern that they would not be believed, or being skeptical that anything would be done to address the behaviours if reported.

So, where do we go from here? For a problem this prevalent and sustained, there is no one simple solution. As the WIW Report states, tackling the issue, and the advancement of women in the workplace more generally, requires “deep, systemic change” to move the dial.⁶ Both reports provide some recommendations that employers can implement going forward. These include:

- clarity on policies⁷
- fostering an organizational culture in which harassment is not tolerated⁸ (which includes ensuring that senior leaders role model the right behaviours)⁹

- improving mechanisms for reporting¹⁰
- surveys to understand norms, attitudes, and experiences with sexual harassment and to track change¹¹
- providing training to foster equity and inclusion¹² and on definitions, policies, and accountability measures¹³

As we noted in a [previous blog](#), a sexual and gender-based violence assessment can be an option for proactively tackling the issue of sexual harassment in the workplace and can incorporate any or all of the above recommendations. The data is clear – more needs to be done to address these issues if we want to start creating meaningful change in the workplace.

Footnotes

1. Raj A, Rao N, Patel P, Kearl H. #MeToo 2024: A National Study of Sexual Harassment and Assault in the United States. Newcomb Institute. Tulane University. September 2024. <https://newcomb.tulane.edu/content/metoo-research> (“Tulane Report”).
2. McKinsey & Company and LeanIn.org, “Women in the Workplace Report 2024,” <https://womenintheworkplace.com> (“WIW Report”).
3. WIW Report at page 44.
4. Tulane Report at page 27.
5. WIW Report at page 44.
6. WIW Report at page 45.
7. Tulane Report at 29.
8. Tulane Report at 29.
9. WIW Report at 45.
10. Tulane Report at 29.
11. Tulane Report at 29.

12. WIW Report at 47.

13. Tulane Report at 29.

The content of this article is intended to provide a general guide to the subject matter. Specialist advice should be sought about your specific circumstances.

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