

A Vicious Cycle: How The Glass Ceiling Fuels Workplace Sexual Harassment

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High-profile sexual harassment cases and issues have been splashed all over the news for months now. What sometimes gets lost in the conversation, however, is the fact that the dearth of women in the most senior/powerful positions in many of these companies ([the glass ceiling](#)) helps perpetuate a workplace culture in which sexual harassment is allowed to fester.

On the one hand, it's an oversimplification to say that having more women in higher-level positions would stamp out all sexual harassment problems. But on the other hand, it's hard to deny that if more women are in supervisory, managerial, and executive jobs at a company, then the company is more likely to be proactive about addressing the problem and actually holding harassers accountable.

For example, the Washington Post recently published an account about the experiences of women who had been sexually harassed at work, and a common theme emerged that the workplaces were male-dominated and lacked women in senior positions. For example:

Shannon, 32, medical sales representative in Washington state: Almost all of my co-workers were male. They would talk about "eating taco." When I came back from having a child, one of them said, "Can somebody cry like a baby to make Shannon leak?" It was a fraternity. You either played along or you got maligned, and in the end, I wasn't playing along.

Glass ceiling trends and underlying causes

According to a Women in the Workplace study released by McKinsey & Co., for every 100 women who get promoted from an entry-level position to manager, 130 men advance. The study found that women are less likely than men to advance for various reasons:

- they experience an uneven playing field,
- their odds of advancement lower at every level;
- there is a persistent leadership gap in the most senior roles;
- gender diversity is not widely believed to be a priority; and
- while employee programs designed to help balance work and family are abundant, participation is low among both sexes due to concerns that using them will negatively affect their careers.

While women and minorities have made many gains in the workplace in recent decades, the highest ranks of too many companies, accounting firms, law firms, and other professional services firms are still dominated primarily by white men.



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Sexual harassment is both perpetuated by, and helps reinforce, the glass ceiling

More than fifty years after Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, too many workers are denied equal opportunity in the workplace and face [egregious harassment](#) and retaliation.

For example, nearly 1 out of every 3 women (ages 18-34) experience sexual harassment at work, according to a study. And this study also finds that more than 70% of the women harassed did not report it.

A variety of factors are at play when it comes to explaining the low numbers of victims who report the harassment, but two big parts of this problem are:

- the lack of female employees in a position of power to help address these types of complaints
- the number of women who are then retaliated against if they do report the harassment

Another factor in the low reporting of sexual harassment at work is that employees often do not understand their legal rights to be free from this kind of discrimination.

The guide provides “plain English” answers to common questions about sexual harassment, including:

- Must the harassment come from my supervisor?
- What defenses may my employer use against my sexual harassment claim?
- What is the deadline for filing a sexual harassment complaint?
- How do I prove my workplace is a “hostile work environment”?
- What damages and remedies are available to victims of sexual harassment?

Glass ceiling and sex harassment problems collide in various industries

Glass ceiling discrimination is present throughout [corporate America](#), but certain professional fields, such as the financial, [economics](#), and [tech](#) industries have even fewer female executives and senior managers.

Likewise, the glass ceiling in the [sciences field](#) is closely associated with the rampant sexual harassment reported by female scientists. A report by the Journal of Geophysical Research: Planets, finds the female scientists report “a troubling picture . . . of low support, isolation, stereotype threat (feeling at risk of conforming to stereotypes) . . .” This lack of support coupled with sexual harassment results in findings like this:

18% of women of color, and 12% of white women, skipped professional events because they did not feel safe attending, identifying a significant loss of career opportunities due to a hostile climate.

Steps forward

Debating whether the glass ceiling amplifies sexual harassment or vice-versa is a bit like a “chicken or the egg” argument. But steps can be taken to start addressing both problems in a concrete way.

One idea, which was included in the [Uber diversity and harassment report](#) (authored by former Attorney General Eric Holder), is to tie managers’ financial compensation to how well they adhere to diversity and inclusion policies and other ethical business practices. The reports notes that:

Experience shows that compensation provides a powerful tool for creating incentives for behavior, and reinforcing a company’s values. Many leading companies have incorporated similar metrics into the compensation packages for senior executives as a way of ensuring that their compensation practices reward conduct that is consistent with the cultural environment that they hope to create.

For many people, money is the ultimate motivator and if Uber successfully improves its workplace culture by tying diversity and ethical business practices to financial gains, then it will be exciting to see what ripple effects this may cause across corporate America.

This concept alone, however, will not be enough and it is important for companies, employee rights groups, and the broader public to keep having this difficult but vital conversation about how to help ensure equal treatment of women in the workplace.

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