

CPH News and Views

A semi-monthly column on emerging topics related to healthy workplaces

Issue #63: Workplace Sexual Harassment among Low-Income Latinas (Latinas TRASH Violence at Work)

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Workplace Sexual Harassment is defined as a form of sex discrimination at work, which may include unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, other verbal or physical harassment of a sexual nature, and also offensive remarks about a person's sex and rude jokes.¹ Broad categories of sexually harassing behavior include: 1) gender harassment (verbal and nonverbal behaviors that convey hostility, objectification, degrading, and sexist attitudes); 2) unwanted sexual attention (verbal or physical unwelcome sexual advances to sexual imposition and assault); and 3) sexual coercion (solicitation or coercion of sexual activity by promise of reward "quid pro quo" or threat of punishment).²

Hispanic women are more likely to work in low-income occupations; in 2018, 32% were employed in service occupations (i.e., healthcare support, food preparation and serving related, cleaning and maintenance, and personal care) and 5.9% in production occupations.³ Although sexual harassment occurs across all industries, there is a high prevalence in industries with large numbers of low-wage jobs, primarily in accommodation and food services industry, retail trade, manufacturing, and health care.⁴

Latinas TRASH Violence at Work Project

We conducted a pilot study that engaged members of the MassCOSH Worker Center International Women's Committee in conducting interviews with 42 immigrant Latinas regarding their experience of sexual harassment and violence in the workplace. Each of the women who agreed to be interviewed had faced or witnessed at least one such experience. Participants worked as factory operators, residential cleaners, babysitters, hotel housekeepers, and restaurant workers (dishwashers, waitresses, cashiers). Most participants were employed directly (67%); 19% were hired through a temporary agency, and 10% worked for a subcontractor. Sixty-three percent of the interviewees reported the "boss" (e.g., supervisor or owner) as the most common harasser followed by co-workers (38%). Customers were also identified as the harasser by 30% of participants working in restaurants, and 67% of waitresses.

Sixty-six percent of participants reported that comments about physical appearance or dressing (gender harassment) were very frequent in the workplace. Some participants interpreted early advances as "testing the waters" before proceeding to more explicit harassment behaviors.

Forty-one percent of participants reported physical closeness and unwanted contact. Intentionally encroaching on personal space, grabbing women's hands, putting their hands too low in the women's back, waist, legs, or buttocks were common situations reported. Ten percent of the participants reported specific behaviors such as forcing kisses, touching own genitals in front of women, rubbing genitals against women's bodies, and a rape attempt.

Receiving explicit sexual propositions was mentioned by 28% of interviewees. This behavior was most prevalent with new and/or young employees, women working alone in isolated areas (e.g., hotel rooms, supply rooms) and during night shifts. Waitresses most often received this type of harassment from drunk customers.

Immigration status and temporary contracts were situations used by harassers as *quid pro quo*. Sixteen percent of the interviewees reported this type of sexual harassment; all identified the

supervisor as the harasser. Recommending the employee to be hired directly by the company, paying the employee's home expenses, and filing legal documents to regularize their immigration status were offered as an exchange for fulfilling sexual demands.

Only 17% of participants said they reported sexual harassment. The most common barriers were fear of being fired (30%), lack of awareness of the reporting process (22%), receiving threats from the harasser or somebody from the workplace (22%), expecting that their reaction would have stopped the harasser (7%), and feeling ashamed or guilty for the situation (5%). From those who did not report, only 6% talked about the situation with somebody else outside of the workplace, usually a friend.

Many of the participants reported that being exposed to workplace sexual harassment had immediate and/or long-term impacts on their eating and sleeping habits, mood, motivation, and self-confidence. The experience also brought pessimism about their future because of a powerless feeling due to having more to lose than to win if they reported the harasser. While no reporting is common among all women who experience sexual harassment, it may be particularly true for immigrant Latinas. Their difficulties in getting another job due to low education and job skills, English proficiency, and even immigration status might deepen the adverse conditions of Latina workers by overlapping their personal and social vulnerabilities with work conditions.

Take-Home Messages

- Workplace sexual harassment is employment discrimination and a violation of human rights.
- Immigrant Latina women are particularly vulnerable to workplace sexual harassment because typically they have low status in the workplace and in society in general.
- Workplace sexual harassment and violence affect women's health.
- Workplace sexual harassment affects women's health.
- Employers must enforce a comprehensive sexual harassment policy that provides secure reporting, procedures to identify and stop insidious early behaviors, supports women who report, and applies disciplinary measures fairly at every level.

References

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