



A **MATTER** *OF* **RESPECT**

THE AIR FORCE AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT

by Tracey P. Wood

Sexual harassment is a form of discrimination that has recently spotlighted every sector of the work force. All levels of government, corporate America, the armed forces, military academies, universities, colleges and other adult education programs have had to develop overdue solutions for this productivity hazard.

Why does it exist? Why is it a pro-

ductivity hazard? In the midst of all the recent sexual harassment scandals and investigations, how does the military measure up? And, how is the Air Force defining and handling sexual harassment complaints?

Sexual harassment is an unlawful act cited by the Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) Commission as a form of discrimination based on arbi-

trary factors which, in this case, is gender. According to Air Force policy, any unwelcome sexual advances, request for sexual favors or other verbal and physical conduct of a sexual nature can be taken as sexual harassment. Some of the more common forms include unwelcome and repeated sexual comments, looks or gestures, deliberate touching, leaning over and "un-

dressing" with the eyes, pornographic displays, offensive jokes, explicit remarks about gender, and the offering of sexual paraphernalia.

HAZARDS

Sexual harassment exists not out of affection, physical attraction or sexual desire; most sexual harassers are executing a power play, for either personal power or social control. Harassing may make someone feel more important, like a way of using one's gender to remind them of their place. Or, it could be a tool to scare away the opposite sex. When in competition with or threatened by the presence of an individual, sexual harassment may be used as a strategy to weaken the victim's confidence.

Why is sexual harassment a productivity hazard? Besides the harasser spending work time to plan and implement his or her next move, the harasser may become hostile. Sexual harassment hinders its victim's concentration, and causes other employees to become nervous, jumpy, fearful and reclusive. They, too, may feel intimidated, hostile or become offensive. These feelings add additional stress to an employee's workload.

That additional stress could lead to a higher turnover rate, which increases training expenses while lowering productivity. The stress can cause illness, such as depression, feelings of defeat or powerlessness, anxiety, stomach problems, headaches and backaches. In return, the establishment incurs high sick leave expenses and receives missed days of productivity.

Just how rampant is sexual harassment? A 1980 U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board poll of federal workers showed 42 percent of women and 15 percent of the men had experienced sexual harassment in the 24 months prior to the study. In 1987, after sexual harassment education had been implemented, the results of a similar poll showed little change: women stayed at 42 percent, while men dropped to 14 percent.

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cent of the women claim to have experienced sexual harassment, as opposed to some 15 percent of the men. In academic situations, campus polls show that 40 to 70 percent of female students and less than five percent of male students have been victims of sexual harassment. In most cases, those college polls show, the harassment has come from other students.

The Pentagon released the results of a worldwide military survey in September 1990, indicating 64 percent of the women and 17 percent of the men were sexually harassed. In 1991, the Navy conducted an additional survey that reported 75 percent of the women and 50 percent of the men said sexual harassment had occurred in their commands.

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According to the Pentagon, the number of Air Force complaints filed with Social Action Services worldwide increased an average of 12 percent from 1987 to 1991. Information gathered from the Air Force District of Washington indicated 25 to 33 percent of sexual harassment complaints were filed by men. This is an unusual statistic when compared to the civilian sector; however, the Air Force classifies all sexual harassment, assault or dis-

crimination cases as sexual discrimination complaints. It does not, however, include homosexual grievances.

"Complaints of homosexual harassment are turned over to the Office of Special Investigations," said SMSgt. Cornell Langford, superintendent of social actions at Andrews AFB, Md. "Homosexuality violates the Uniform Code of Military Justice. Most guys don't complain about sexual harassment, they kind of welcome [the sexual attention from females]. Male complaints [are usually] sex discrimination, where a male victim alleged he was denied equal opportunity treatment because of his gender."

THE AIR FORCE'S POLICY

The Air Force adheres to the Department of Defense's sexual harassment policy, as clearly stated in Air Force Regulation 30-2, April 18, 1986, page 44, section 3:

"Sexual harassment. A subcategory of sex discrimination. Sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature constitute sexual harassment when: (a) Submission to such conduct is made either explicitly or implicitly a term or condition of a person's job, pay or career; (b) Submission to or rejection of such conduct by a person is used as a basis for career or employment decisions affecting this person; (c) Such conduct has the purpose or effect of interfering with an individual's performance or creating an intimidating, hostile or offensive environment."

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Anyone in the chain of command — a supervisor, a co-worker, a subordinate, a frequent visitor to the work place — can qualify as the harasser. Social Actions works in combination with EEO when the case involves a civilian and an airman.

WHAT TO DO

When confronted with a situation that could be sexual harassment, make the harasser aware that the behavior is offensive and make it clear that it must stop. If

you're nervous about confronting the individual, visit your Social Actions Office for guidance. A note of the situation can be made without filing charges, while the victim attempts to handle the situation.

"When someone makes a comment that is perceived to be sexist, ask, 'What did you mean by that comment?'" SMSgt. Langford advised. "What may be offensive to one may not be to another. Many times, people are not assertive enough to speak up. They let it [unacceptable behavior] go on until the behavior becomes unbearable."

Additional advice, offered in Air Force training on sexual harassment, is to log incidents. Maintain a record of the harasser's behavior in detail, of who was present, and the date and time of the occurrence. Draw attention

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to the harasser's behavior with a statement like, "Did you see what he [she] just said [did]?" By doing so, the behavior may stop. It will also make it easier for witnesses to recall the incident.

If the incidents continue, work within the chain of command or file a formal complaint. When filing a complaint, it is best to have the log with dates and witnesses, in addition to any evidence such as love notes, photographs, etc.

If you're the one being accused of sexual harassment, attempt to understand how your actions could have been misconstrued or offensive. Apologize and admit to any insensitivity. Discontinue any offensive behavior and talk with legal counsel. Request to have a lawyer present when

being charged and questioned by Social Actions, and have character references in order.

The Air Force's clear intolerance of such behavior is further sup-

ported with a two-hour training program, "Sexual Harassment Awareness Education." SHAE is a mandatory course taken by all incoming personnel during entry training courses, then again at their first duty station and during all professional military advancement education courses as a preventive measure.

If sexual harassment takes place in spite of these measures, the complaint handling procedure begins. A person makes an allegation of harassment using the chain of command or to Social Actions, and a Social Actions counselor goes over the allegation and advises the complainant. If no resolution is possible, a formal complaint is filed.

Based on the information provided by an alleged victim, Social Actions may establish the probability that ha-



harassment did exist. There is an inquiry, followed by a formal investigation that includes interviews and sworn, signed statements from witnesses. After the Judge Advocate

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these women are hateful toward men, wish to demonstrate power and control over a man, and it usually results in "male bashing."

To help avoid a

General (JAG) and Social Actions finalize their investigation, the findings are passed to the alleged harasser's chain of command, which is then responsible for resolving the situation and handing out punishment if harassment is proven.

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sexual harassment confrontation:

- Conduct your actions and conversations in a professional manner.
- Keep your personal and professional lives separate.
- When something offensive occurs, point it out immediately. Don't ignore, go along with or allow the situation to build up into something embarrassing.
- Avoid frequent, unnecessary one-on-one private moments.

If the accuser was untruthful, however, punishment may still be handed out. One that falsely accuses is just as guilty as a true harasser. According to Al Speaks, chief of the Equal Opportunity and Treatment Branch of the Social Actions Office: "To use the system to get back at someone, if it's proven later on, then actions can be taken against the person who alleged the discrimination [or sexual harassment]." Mr. Speaks added that he has not had any false accusations to process.

ON THE STRAIGHT AND NARROW

Statistically, many will avoid these types of confrontations. Some 90 percent of sexual harassment victims are women, yet more than 50 percent of women never experience sexual harassment. Men are usually the harasser, yet one psychological study indicated that only five percent of the male population is capable of such actions. In the civilian sector, 22 percent of male harassment victims stated it was of homosexual nature; only three percent of women said they had been harassed by another woman.

Sexual harassment is a very costly form of discrimination that must be stopped if America is to reap the full benefit of its vast human resources. Men and women working together create a strong force, and it needn't be weakened by gender-discriminatory acts. "Aim High," since it takes all of us to create a bright and positive future.

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