

#MeToo Wakes Up The Workplace

BY NIKI T. INGRAM

Every now and then the world changes course dramatically and without warning. The result is a new normal. It seems that we are in the midst of such a change in that the world has decided that sexual harassment and misconduct against women will no longer be tolerated in the workplace. Although most places have had human relations policies and codes of ethics in place for years, the reality has been that actual behavior is not always consistent with those policies.

There is a wonderful expression that is currently passing from urban speak into the main street lexicon. The concept is that of “being woke” or “wokedom.” Being woke means that one has a heightened awareness of issues about racial and social justice and implicit in the idea is that one is willing to stay educated on the issues so that society improves. As a country, we are becoming woke about sexual harassment in the workplace. The initial avalanche came from the entertainment world and empowered women by asking them to use social media if they had been harassed. The floodgates opened, and we then begin to hear from women in the sports world, the political arena, academia and corporate America. As we hear from each industry there are comments expressing shock and dismay. I am surprised by the surprise and am not sure if people are really surprised or if they are being disingenuous. My lack of surprise is premised on the fact that most women can hit #MeToo when they talk about what their experiences have been in the workplace.

Sexual harassment has traditionally been an area that women haven't openly discussed with each other. For women of a certain age, who experience or experienced sexual harassment, there

were the unspoken questions of “Why did you put yourself in that position? What else could you have said? What could you have done differently?” What's curious about this movement is that because women are realizing how universal the experience is, they are willing to talk more about it. Social media created a critical mass that freed women to say, “No more.”

In discussing this issue, I am not talking about sexual assault but about the comments that women frequently hear in the workplace that are, at best, uncomfortable to hear and, at worse, insulting. It is important to point out that the offensive acts are not the casual joke or a genuine compliment but the act of being objectified or having someone project his(or her) sexual fantasy onto you with comments that can't be described as anything but inappropriate. These incidents have nothing to do with sexuality and everything to do with power. Adult sexual relationships are, by definition, consensual and the behavior that is being discussed is not consensual. While women are taught skills for the workplace, there is no class that teaches you what to do when someone in a power position over you makes such remarks. We tell women, whether young or old, to report this to someone, but rarely acknowledge how hard it really is to do that. No one wants to jeopardize her income, her position or be thought of as “that women.” However, it is exhausting

and demoralizing to have to deal with these types of comments, becoming one more thing that you must negotiate that makes it that much harder to succeed in the world.

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of women in the profession is going to increase. The demographics means that the workplace has changed. Regardless of how you feel about people being held to account for incidents that happened decades ago or even five years ago, when the world was a very different place, the number of stories that come out each day mean that we must change our behavior. We all must work together to do this. I am not suggesting that all men behave badly or that all offices are filled with

harassment. What I am suggesting is that we hold each other accountable. We must stop excusing bad behavior. Let's channel our inner TSA. If you see something, say something. The world demands nothing less. It is time for us all to "get woke." ■

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The Philadelphia Lawyer (USPS #025-241), printed with soy inks on recycled paper, is published quarterly in March, June, September and December by the Philadelphia Bar Association, 1101 Market St., 11th floor, Philadelphia, Pa. 19107-2955. Telephone: (215) 238-6300. E-mail: tplmag@philabar.org. Subscription cost for members is \$5 which is included in annual dues, and for nonmembers is \$45 yearly. The opinions stated herein are not necessarily those of the Philadelphia Bar Association. All manuscripts submitted will be carefully reviewed for possible publication. The editors reserve the right to edit all material for style and length. Advertising rates and information are available from Don Chalpin, Associate Publisher, ALM, 1617 JFK Boulevard, Suite 1750, Philadelphia, PA 19103, (215) 557-2359. Periodicals postage at Philadelphia and additional locations. POSTMASTER: please send changes to The Philadelphia Lawyer, c/o Philadelphia Bar Association, 1101 Market St., 11th floor, Philadelphia, PA 19107-2955. As policy, we do not compensate our writers.

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