

Sexual Harassment and the Gender Wage Gap

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Despite being prohibited by Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, workplace sexual harassment remains pervasive and pernicious. Sexual harassment is one of many manifestations of power imbalances in the workplace. It affects women and men across industries and occupations. And, it can have greater consequences for women who face other forms of discrimination and harassment, such as women of color, LGBTQ women and women with disabilities.

While sexual harassment is increasingly being recognized in the national dialogue, it is nothing new – and over time it has negatively impacted women’s workplace opportunities and career decisions, resulting in significant and often overlooked financial consequences. Preventing and effectively addressing workplace sexual harassment is one way to help close the gender wage gap and promote women’s financial security.

Sexual harassment can impede a woman’s job performance, workplace advancement and earnings.

- ▶ One in three women say they have been the victim of sexual harassment in the workplace.¹ Women who experience sexual harassment at work often avoid reporting it for fear of retaliation, termination or inaction.² Among women who do report sexual harassment to their employers, nearly half report being dissatisfied with the response.³
- ▶ Many women who experience sexual harassment at work report increased anxiety and depression, which is associated with lower productivity and poorer performance at work.⁴ Some report experiencing a decline in job involvement and satisfaction, as well as increases in absenteeism, turnover, early retirement and a range of negative health outcomes.⁵
- ▶ Women in workplaces that do not address sexual harassment may feel less empowered to negotiate salaries and raises, depressing their long-term earnings and advancement.

Sexual harassment can affect women’s career choices directly and indirectly, reinforcing occupational segregation and perpetuating the wage gap.

- ▶ A recent study found that women who say they’ve experienced sexual harassment at work are 6.5 times more likely to change jobs than women who have not – often to a job of lower quality or with lower pay.⁶

- ▶ Hostile work environments often lead women to avoid entering or staying in certain industries, increasing occupational gender segregation.⁷
- ▶ Sexual harassment exists in every industry and occupation, but there are industries where it is especially prevalent.⁸ Women in male-dominated industries that have historically excluded women, like manufacturing and construction, report more incidences of sexual harassment.⁹
- ▶ Many women take pay cuts and make sacrifices that harm their careers to escape sexual harassment.¹⁰ Women who have been sexually harassed at work report significant disruption and financial stress, comparable to what women who have experienced financial stress resulting from serious injury, assault or incarceration experience.¹¹

For women of color, the consequences of workplace sexual harassment can be even more devastating.

- ▶ Women of color often face intersecting forms of discrimination and harassment. Many avoid disclosing workplace sexual harassment because of the heightened risk of retaliation, doubt, victim-blaming and other harmful, prejudiced responses.¹² This indicates that women of color may be less likely to have their experiences of sexual harassment addressed or their rights enforced.
- ▶ The financial consequences of reporting harassment and facing retaliation, or leaving a job due to harassment, can be even more severe for women of color because they face greater wage gaps than white, non-Hispanic women. On average, Latinas are paid 54 cents, Native women are paid 57 cents, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander women are paid 59 cents, Black women are paid 63 cents and white, non-Hispanic women are paid 79 cents for every dollar paid to white, non-Hispanic men.¹³ (On average, Asian women are paid 87 cents for every dollar paid to a white, non-Hispanic man, but the wage gap is much larger for some ethnic subgroups.¹⁴)

Addressing sexual harassment in the workplace improves workers’ safety, well-being and professional and economic opportunities – including the ability to earn fair wages. Policymakers on the local, state and federal levels, as well as business leaders, should pay more attention to how these two forms of discrimination compound each other and take bold action to address sexual harassment and promote women’s earnings and advancement.

Learn more about the gender wage gap at NationalPartnership.org/Gap.

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The National Partnership for Women & Families is a nonprofit, nonpartisan advocacy group dedicated to promoting fairness in the workplace, access to quality health care and policies that help women and men meet the dual demands of work and family. More information is available at NationalPartnership.org.

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