

Equal opportunity in the workplace

[Business](#), [Employment](#)



Fifty years ago, human resource management was considerably simpler because our work force was strikingly homogeneous. In the 1950s, for example, the U. S work force consisted of primarily of white males employed in manufacturing, having wives who stayed at home, tending to the family's two-plus children. Inasmuch as these workers were alike, personnel's job was certainly easier. But times have changed. And with these changes have come a new workforce, one that by the year 2020 will be characterized as quite diverse (Crittenden, 1994, p. 18).

Such work diversity has been brought about by the equal employment opportunities for men and women. With the entry of women into the workforce, prejudice has also entered. Today, we find two kinds of sexism attacking the women at workplace – hostile sexism and benevolent sexism. While hostile sexism attacks women directly by way of degrading them during a conversation, using vulgarity at them or shouting at them. On the other hand, benevolent sexism attacks them indirectly by reminding them their traditional roles of an obedient wife or a submissive girl friend and tries to pull them down.

Sex/Gender Issues in Equal Employment The influx of women into the workforce has major social, economic, and organizational consequences. The percentage of the total U. S. civilian workforce has increased dramatically since 1950, to where women comprise almost half of today's workers (Brady, 2001). A major reason for the increasing share of women in the workforce is that more women with children are working than in previous decades. About 76% of women ages 25-54 are in the workforce (Brady, 2001).

Further, about half of all currently working women are single, separated, divorced, widowed, or otherwise single heads of households. Consequently, they are “primary” income earners, not co income providers, who often must balance family and work responsibilities. As part of managing diversity, it is important that employers take steps to have policies compatible with workers who are pregnant or are new parents. Due to the Pregnancy Discrimination Act, employers must not discriminate against pregnant women when making selection, promotion, training, or other employment-related decisions.

The Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) requirements also affect the management of pregnant workers and new parents. This act applies to both female and male employees who are new parents, either through adoptions or natural births. Many employers have policies allowing new mothers to nurse or use breast pumps during business hours away from their worksites (Dore, 2001). Sex Discrimination in Jobs and Careers The growth in the number of women in the workforce has led to more sex gender issues related to jobs and careers.

Additionally, the selection and promotion criteria that employers use can discriminate against women. Some cases have found that women were not allowed to enter certain jobs or job fields. Particularly problematic is the use of marital or family status as a basis for not selecting women. Nepotism Many employers have policies that restrict or prohibit nepotism, the practice of allowing relatives to work for the same employer. Other firms require only that relatives not work directly for or with each other or be placed in a position where potential collusion or conflicts could occur.

The policies most frequently cover spouses, brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters. Generally, employer anti-nepotism policies have been upheld by courts, in spite of the concern that they tend to discriminate against women more than men (because women tend to be denied employment or leave employers more often as a result of marriage to other employees). Job Assignments and Nontraditional Jobs One result of the increasing number of women in the workforce is the movement of women into jobs traditionally held by men.

The U. S. Department of Labor defines nontraditional occupations for women as those in which women comprise 25% or less of the total number employed (U. S Department of Labor, 2001). Even though the nature of the work and working conditions may contribute some to this pattern, many of these jobs pay well, and more women would enter these occupations if greater efforts were made by employers. The right of employers to reassign women from hazardous jobs to ones that may be lower paying because of health-related concerns is another issue.

Employers' fears about higher health insurance costs, and even possible lawsuits involving such problems as birth defects caused by damage sustained during pregnancy, have led some employers to institute reproductive and fetal protection policies. However, the U. S, Supreme Court has ruled such policies are illegal. Also, having different job conditions for men and women usually is held to be discriminatory. In a related area, a U. S. district court case found that the exclusion of prescription contraception from an employer's benefits plan constitutes sex discrimination (Erickson v. Bartell Drug Co, 2001).

The Glass Ceiling For years women's groups have alleged that women in workplaces encounter a glass ceiling, which refers to discriminatory practices that have prevented women and other protected-class members from advancing to executive-level jobs. The extent of the problem is seen in the results of a survey of 825 large firms, in which women accounted for only 3.9 % of the highest-paid executives, and only 1% of the firms had a female CEO (Lavelle, 2001).

Similarly problems exist for racial/minority individuals as well (Raimy, 2001). In conjunction with the Civil Rights Act of 1991, a Glass Ceiling Commission conducted a study on how to shatter the glass ceiling encountered by women and other protected class members. A number of recommendations were included in the commission's report (U. S Department of Labor, 1995). "Glass Walls" and "Glass Elevator" A related problem is that women have tended to advance to senior management in a limited number of support areas such as HR and corporate communications.

Because jobs in these "supporting" areas tend to pay less than jobs in sales, marketing, operations or finance the overall impact is to reduce women's career progression and income. Limits that keep women from progressing only in certain fields have been referred to as "glass walls" or "glass elevators." Breaking the Glass A growing number of employers have recognized that "breaking the glass," whether ceilings, walls, or elevators, is good business. Some of the most common means used to "break the glass" are as follows:

1. Establishing formal mentoring programs for women and racial/ethnic individuals. . Providing career rotation opportunities into operations,

marketing, and sales for individuals who have shown talent in accounting, human resources, and other areas. 3. Increasing top management and Board of Directors membership to include women and individuals of color. 4. Establishing clear goals for retention and progression of protected-class individuals and holding managers accountable for achieving these goals. 5. Allowing for alternative work arrangements for employees, particularly those balancing work/family responsibilities.

Nature of Sexual Harassment Sexual harassment is a significant concern in many organizations and can occur by men harassing women, women harassing men, or same sex harassment. Most frequently sexual harassment occurs by a male in a supervisory or managerial position who harasses women within his “ power structure. ” However, women managers have been found guilty of sexually harassing male employees. Also, same sex harassment has occurred. Third parties who are not employees also have been found to be harassers (Flynn, 2000).

From a vending machine sales driver to a board member in a rural cooperative, employees have won sexual harassment complaints against their employers who took no action against the third party causing the harassment. Even customer service representatives and food servers have won sexual harassment complaints because their employers refused to protect the employees from regular sexual harassment by aggressive customers. **Types of Sexual Harassment** Two basic types of sexual harassment have been defined by EEOC regulations and a large number of court cases.

The two types are defined as follows: 1. Quid pro quo is harassment in which employment outcomes are linked to the individual granting sexual favors. 2. Hostile environment harassment exists when an individual's work performance or psychological well-being is unreasonably affected by intimidating or offensive working conditions. In the quid pro quo type, an employee may be told he or she may get promoted, receive a special raise, or be given a desirable work assignment, but only if the employee submits to granting some sexual favors to the supervisor.

Unfortunately, hostile environment harassment is much more prevalent, partially because the standards and consequences are more varied. Actual case situations illustrate how the hostile environment standard has been used. The male manager at a fast-food franchise restaurant in Maryland was found guilty of sexual harassment when he repeatedly made sexual jokes and discussed sexual behavior with two younger female employees. When they complained to the manager's boss, no action was taken, and the harassment increased (EEOC v. R&R Ventures, 2001).

A female sales representative filed a sexual harassment charge that a male manager used offensive language told derogatory jokes, and distributed sexually explicit materials at sales meetings. Following her complaint, the firm required the manager to take an unpaid three-month leave and have additional management training. Interestingly, the court ruled that the alleged name-calling and offensive language was not offensive because the woman used such language regularly. Ultimately the court ruled against the woman's sexual harassment complaint. "

These cases and many others have revealed that commenting on dress or appearance, telling jokes that are suggestive or sexual in nature, allowing revealing photos and posters to be on display, or making continual requests to get together after work can lead to the creation of a hostile work environment. To conclude, the problems faced by Human Resource Professionals while dealing with work place inequality could be summarized as follows. Any kind of bullying at work could result in, decrease in employee morale, lack of motivation, decrease in productivity, and increased employee turnover.

All these factors finally contribute to Organizational conflicts (Felsenthal, 1995). The problem could be resolved by Human Resource by way of a collective agreement on the work culture. Based on the agreement, the management could put out policies that would apply to all staff and intimate the same to all the employees. Some elements and principles could be contained in such a policy. It would apply to all staff (managerial, executive, manual and non-manual workers); the working position and personal situation of offenders are irrelevant, and so are the victim's.

Every employee would be required to respect the personality and dignity of every other worker. Every employee would have the right to respect for his/her own personality and dignity. It would cover sexual harassment, bullying and gender discrimination. The Policy would set out the forms of conduct deemed to be infringements of contractual obligations and hence disciplinary matters (as well as potentially constituting grounds for civil or criminal action).

The victim may ask the management or trade union or the human resources department for assistance in approaching the Work Culture Commission; improving the quality of performance feedback, including informal developer oriented feedback as well as corrective feedback. The Policy should ensure improving the availability of flexible working arrangements, and ensuring fair and reasonable treatment of staff. The Policy should communicate openly at all levels, fostering a more engaging work environment through involvement of staff in decision making processes that impact on their work.

It should also increase the management by way of setting targets/goals and ensuring effective reporting structures. A Policy or Code of Conduct should be written, in consultation with employees. Training should be provided to the employees on the organization's policies and procedures, and ensure that supervisors and managers have the skills to recognize and deal with inappropriate behavior. The aim of the training should be to create awareness about what bullying is; the warning signals and effects, why it is not tolerated and include this information during induction of new employees.

Procedures of complaint handling and investigation should be developed and treat all complaints seriously. A contact person should be appointed for informal enquiries, concerns or complaints, so that actions can be taken early in the process to avoid unacceptable behavior escalating into workplace bullying. The contact person can be a trained person within the organization or an employee assistance provider, whose role is to deal with various employee issues and who may be able to provide advice or mediate

in bullying cases. The effectiveness of any action taken in response to discriminating or bullying behavior should be monitored.