Institutional Strategies for Dealing with Sexual Harassment

Merle Waxman

Sexual harassment, as a problem at the institutional level, has recently emerged as an important, pervasive, and highly visible issue. Given the changing structure of American families, and the evolving role of women in the work force (Sandroff, 1988), it is likely that sexual harassment, over the next few years, will continue to be viewed as a major issue. Moreover, in view of the significant implications of recent legal decisions (e.g., Meritor Savings Bank vs. Vinson, 1986) with respect to corporate and institutional responsibility, increasing attention has, in the recent past, been paid to sexual harassment and gender-related discrimination by management.

Despite the recent increase in interest, sexual harassment has only been a subject for scholarly inquiry over the past few years. While a number of excellent analyses of this subject exist (Collins & Blodgett, 1981; U.S. Government Printing Office, 1988) sexual harassment has been less studied than other aspects of the work environment. In this regard, the recent article by Popovich (1988) is especially valuable. This article reviews the definition of sexual harassment, examines some of its implications in the workplace, and outlines several strategies for dealing with sexual harassment.

Popovich is to be congratulated on a scholarly and incisive review of this subject. In the context of employee rights, a number of additional institutional strategies exist, which have proven to be effective in proactively dealing with sexual harassment in the workplace. Since these strategies have not yet been adopted on a widespread basis, they are worth reviewing:

Office for Women in Medicine, Yale University School of Medicine, New Haven, Connecticut 06510.

KEY WORDS: sexual harassment; women; ombudsman.
1. Establishment of an Office for Women. A number of institutions have established an Office for Women (Donoghue, 1988). These offices often have a number of functions, which include career counseling and mentoring, development of seminar series, and providing access to role models. These offices also provide advisory services to women in cases of sex discrimination, racial or ethnic discrimination, sexual harassment, salary inequities, and promotion and tenure disputes. It is important for these offices to explicitly carry the imprimatur of the sponsoring organization or institution, i.e., the office should be labeled “The Office for Women at _______ Corporation.” This has proven to be extremely valuable in a number of institutional contexts. The important point here is that, by virtue of establishing an office that is explicitly supported by the institution, the rights of the office’s constituency (in this case, women) derive organizational legitimacy (Waxman, 1988).

2. Development of Sexual Harassment Workshops or Seminars. A number of organizations have developed workshops or seminars on sexual harassment. These workshops serve to define, both for women and men, sexual harassment and to discuss a variety of approaches for dealing with it. Role playing, in which the participants have to confront specific issues or scenarios derived from the workplace, can be a very valuable part of these workshops. Workshops have been developed at a spectrum of levels and can be specifically designed for staff or management. These workshops also serve to review organizational policy. If given with the strong support of the organization, they serve to reinforce the importance, within the organizational context, of the idea that freedom from sexual harassment represents a fundamental right of workers.

3. Training Sessions for Managers/Administration. An important component in the development of an effective sexual harassment policy centers on the education of managers and administrators in terms of their responsibility (and organizational/institutional responsibility) with respect to sexual harassment. The legal precedent, deriving from Meritor vs. Vinson, is quite clear and implies considerable litigational exposure for an organization if it does not develop effective policies and procedures to deal with sexual harassment. The important point is that sexual harassment should be viewed as a problem shared by labor and management, since both workers and management are exposed to its consequences. As a result of the commonality of exposure, labor and management can be motivated to work effectively together on this issue.

4. Development of an Ombudsman Office. Finally, institutions can benefit greatly from the development, at a general level, of loci for problem solving. The ombudsman concept, whereby a neutral or impartial party within an organization may provide confidential and informal assistance to managers and employees in resolving work-related concerns, by serving as a counselor, go-between, mediator, fact-finder, or upward-feedback mechanism, and whose office is located outside ordinary line-management structures, has proven particularly valuable in this setting (Rowe, 1987; Waxman, 1987). Development of an ombudsman office offers the possibility of informal, nonlitigational conflict resolution. In addition, the ombudsman office can serve as an important monitor of the “institutional pulse” and thus can in many cases anticipate problems and develop proactive solutions. Ombudsman offices have been successfully developed in a number of corporations (Rowe, 1981), as well as professional (Zagoria, 1986) and academic settings (Waxman, 1987).