

Harassment: What's changed?

Many years ago, I was a young history teacher in a small Catholic school. It was, in most respects, a wonderful place, graced by a bevy of competent Ursuline sisters.

The superintendent was a large, strong-willed priest who dominated by the force of his personality and the power of his position and collar.

I was dismayed to discover that the young man who had recently been hired along with me had been given a contract with a significantly higher rate of pay than mine. Why? I inquired.

The answer was simple: He was a married man. I was a single gal. It didn't seem to matter that he had no children and his wife was also employed. It was simply the way things were.

It may seem strange to young women today to hear that story. Why didn't I speak out against pay discrimination?

But maybe my story is not so implausible. In the past few weeks, we've been deluged with tales of women (and sometimes men) being sexually harassed or assaulted in workplaces controlled by powerful men.

These stories are often horrifying, the details salacious at their worst or icky at the least. And for years, whispers and silence accompanied this mistreatment.

Sexual harassment and pay discrimination are very different things, but they are the common turf on which women still battle in the workplace.

For me, this year's incident with Sen. Elizabeth Warren, was emblematic. Senate leadership informed Warren she couldn't read a letter into confirmation testimony for Sen. Jeff Sessions, a nominee for attorney general. The letter was from the late Coretta Scott King, the widow of slain civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., which she had written opposing a previous confirmation for Sessions.

How ironic that a powerful man decided to silence one of the Senate's few female members as well as an iconic woman of color.

Warren kept reading. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, scolded her with words that quickly spread like fall leaves on a windy day: "She was warned. She was given an explanation. Nevertheless, she persisted."

Some might ask, why didn't those who experienced harassment and even assault in the workplace speak out sooner? Where was their persistence?

Power is a mighty tool and sex is a charged and intimate subject. Men wield power in entertainment, government, the upper echelons of journalism and often in the everyday workplace.

And even though we hope we would speak up, we need to remember these women's embarrassment, the fear for their livelihood and careers, the threat of public humiliation. They felt alone.

I would have been laughed out of the little town where I taught if I made an issue of my pay discrimination.

Imagine how exponentially worse to take on a powerful man following a sexual encounter.

In a recent issue of America, the Jesuit review, Jesuit Brother Ken Homan courageously explores his own attitudes. Educated in a Jesuit all-male prep school, he writes, "Whiteness, class advantage and male privilege intertwined to teach me that I am special and stand above others."

Those of us who are parents of sons need to talk with them about their attitudes toward women. We need to teach them respect for women's bodies as well as their brains, and the conviction to speak out if they suspect abuse.

We should question our own attitudes, too. Do we judge women by physical attributes? Do we defer to men simply because they're male?

Do we respect the competence and leadership of females? Do we hold the powerful accountable for sexual misconduct?

Things have changed since I was young. Or have they?

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