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Op-Ed: Pervasive Sexual Harassment and How to Address It

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Despite the gains of the [#MeToo](#) and [#TimesUp](#) movements, sexual harassment is not a problem of the past. As of 2018, [59% of women and 27% of men](#) in the US reported receiving unwanted sexual advances or verbal or physical harassment of a sexual nature, either in or outside of work environments. Toxic work environments recently made national headlines when [Governor Andrew Cuomo was investigated](#) following reports of sexual harassment in his office, resulting in his resignation. In Chicago, both the [Chicago Park District](#) and the [City of Evanston](#) are confronting investigations after widespread reports of sexual harassment and abuse by lifeguards.

Given the pervasiveness of sexual harassment, what can we do to better prevent and respond to sexual harassment and abuse? Across the board, organizations must go beyond conventional, compliance-centric trainings that focus on legal-compliance. They simply [don't work](#), often reinforcing gender stereotypes. Because conventional trainings typically portray [men as powerful and women as vulnerable](#), they prevent women from feeling empowered in the workplace. Supervisors and employees charged with monitoring and confronting harmful behaviors [often fail to act. They may even retaliate](#) against employees who are harassed.

Organizations must embrace policies and practices that transform workplace culture and climate. But where should they begin? Evidence-based research makes it clear that organizations and their staff need the skills and tools needed to identify, prevent, and respond to sexual harassment and abuse. Powerful tools include workplace climate surveys and subsequent action, bystander-intervention trainings, and increasing diversity among leadership.

Firms, organizations, and social groups should conduct regular and frequent employee [climate surveys](#) to detect harassment and design policies to eliminate it. Successful efforts should be rewarded, celebrated and shared beyond their own organizations. Such data can help other organizations to improve their workplace cultures. More information and understanding of employees' experiences will help organizations design trainings to address persistent cultural problems and produce lasting climate change. Such policies will not only reduce harassment but also hold individuals accountable and support survivors of sexual harassment and abuse.

Try to make the actors (e.g. bosses, employers, coworkers, customers) in these dramas visible – rather than leaving them absent. [Bystander trainings](#) may empower everyone in the workplace to stop harassment and encourage employees to disrupt sexual harassment before it happens. Skills learned from such trainings make bystanders more likely to help survivors report and get support after experiencing harassment and/or abuse. They also [increase empathy](#) among colleagues.

At YWCA Metropolitan Chicago, participants in these types of training report walking away with stronger collegial relationships and a stronger sense of community at work, both critical components for a more inclusive workplace and preventing sexual abuse and harassment. Including a focus on bystander-interventions may transform a workplace environment into a community by demonstrating what are and aren't acceptable behaviors.

Promoting more women in leadership positions, including on Boards, will strengthen safeguards against sexual harassment. One method for doing so, the ["Rooney Rule."](#) includes active efforts to recruit women and candidates of historically and presently marginalized groups into an initial pool of candidates for every open leadership and board seat.

The pervasiveness of sexual harassment makes the problem seem insurmountable. But it isn't. Organizations can take evidence-proven steps to prevent sexual harassment from happening in the first place. By going beyond conventional workplace sexual harassment trainings, organizations can transform workplace cultures to be mutually supportive spaces that are inclusive and congenial rather than toxic.