

## Harassment: The Ugly Problem No One Wants To Discuss by M. Sandi Aigoro

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A PERVASIVE AND UNDERREPORTED ISSUE plaguing the professional environment is unreported harassment. Both men and women in today's workplace may experience unreported harassment. Victims and perpetrators are often ushered off to forgetfulness by corporate leaders because of their concern about the potential of public retaliation. Even when reported, rarely are these incidences publicized openly; rather they are swept under the rug and remain so, perpetuating a dangerous myth that such occurrences are tolerated, even accepted. In addition, media attention is directed primarily at high profile individuals. For example, a recent case resulted in \$11.6 million in damages for Isaiah Thomas' verbal abuse and sexual harassment of Brownie Sanders, the highest-ranking female executive with the New York Knickerbockers basketball team.

There is a growing need to address the pressing concern of unreported harassment for many not so notable executives and professionals who do not want to go through public scrutiny. For example, professional women who have experienced harassment should be encouraged to step forward and share their experiences openly through mechanisms such as surveys or public and online forums, programs designed to support reporting of unreported harassment anonymously. It is essential to establish a clear understanding of the impact that unreported harassment has on the bottom line of organizations. Public officials and organizations should join forces to create a national awareness and legitimize unreported incidents. To ensure that these alternatives remain beneficial to both employees and employers, it would be best if organizations report unreported cases only at an industry level, thereby ensuring anonymity so that no one individual or company need be singled out by the media.

Currently, attentions of harassments are often directed to isolated court cases, like Sanders versus Thomas. These attentions often fall on a sensational circumstance involving celebrities. A more recent example in the news involved Kellogg Brown & Root (KRB), a Houston-based corporation. The company resists attempts by Jamie Leigh Jones, an employee who claims to have been raped by six of her male co-workers in Iraq, to nullify an employee contract. The company requires binding arbitration as opposed to litigation. Litigation generally results in higher damages.

Addressing the underreporting harassment issue at the industry level can encourage companies and their watchful corporate citizens to help increase awareness and hold more accountability to the present concern. Pointing fingers is easy but bringing solutions is a challenge. Aside from their standard procedure, employers need additional alternatives. They are often asked to play multiple roles, roles that require them to be the police and the counselor or supplier of harassment management. These conflicting roles encourage them to downplay the impact of harassment by suppressing or removing individuals who raise issues. This "band-aid" approach can cost employers money, productivity, and talents. Harassment isn't just about sex or race; it includes gender, age, ethnicity, religion, some forms of social

segregation, and more. The difficulty with tackling such a sensitive topic is because it is commonly a subjective issue. There are many facets of behavior that could be classified as "harassment." What is a light-hearted joke to one individual could be offensive to another. An innocent motive could solicit an offensive reaction.



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