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WOMEN'S LEGAL DEFENSE FUND

THE IMPACT OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT

- Studies indicate that only between one and seven percent of women who report sexual harassment in surveys actually file a formal complaint or seek legal help. The act of speaking out is itself extremely stressful and inhibits reporting.¹
- Psychologist Sandra Shullman reports that traumatic experiences like sexual harassment are frequently repressed. Often victims remember an incident in bits and pieces. In initially describing an experience of sexual harassment, victims are likely to report in a non-chronological order. Victims' descriptions of harassment may be clearer over time as the mind retrieves more memories.
- Clinical work with women who have been sexually harassed reveals that considerable time often elapses before they realize the wrongness of the perpetrator's behavior and acknowledge their status as legitimate victims.²
- Victims of sexual harassment are often surprised by their harasser's conduct. Victims surveyed in one study usually tried to ignore the behavior or politely refuse the advances.³ Sexual harassment is much more likely to be a cumulative series of escalating episodes rather than on particular event.⁴ After each incident, victims imagine the harassment will eventually stop.⁵
- Dr. Shullman reports that a continuing cordial relationship between a perpetrator of harassment and a victim may be typical. Because of the usual power differential, victims fear retaliation. They may attempt to normalize the relationship to prevent the harassment from escalating. These attempts at normalizing the relationship may continue even after the employment relationship is over.
- The psychological symptoms and effects of sexual harassment may include anger, fear, depression, anxiety, irritability, loss of self-esteem, feelings of humiliation, embarrassment, shame and alienation, and a sense of helplessness and vulnerability. Physical symptoms may include headaches, loss of appetite, gastrointestinal disorders, inability to sleep, weight loss, and crying spells.⁶
- Studies illustrate many reasons why sexual harassment victims cannot or will not reveal their experiences. Among these are holding victims responsible for their own victimization,⁷ the traditional view of a victim as a loser, fear of retaliation, and the belief that the behavior

was not serious or would not be taken seriously.³ According to one study, To the extent that women have a decision about [speaking out about] discrimination, it is fundamentally a choice between miserable alternatives: To speak out, and become a pariah; or to suffer in silence."⁹

Psychologists report that a woman who does speak out about sexual harassment is often a person with a strong sense of integrity who can no longer ignore the injustice.¹⁰

1. Salisbury, Ginorio, Remick & stringer, Counseling Victims of Sexual Harassment, Psychotherapy 23 (2), at 318 (1986).
2. Koss, "Changed Lives: The Psychological Impact of Sexual Harassment," at 75-76, in Ivory Tower: Sexual Harassment on Campus (Michelle Paludi, ed.) (1990).
3. Salisbury, at 318.
4. Koss, at 82.
5. Salisbury, at 318.
6. Salisbury, at 319; Koss, at 79.
7. Koss, at 76.
8. Koss, at 75-76.
9. Hamilton, Alagna, King & Lloyd, The Emotional consequences of Gender-Based Abuse in the Workplace: New Counseling Programs for Sex Discrimination, Women & Therapy 6 (1-2), at 169 (1987).
10. Koss, at 77.