



Thoughts on the finding of bias against women at Merrill Lynch

In April, the New York Times published an article on the finding of bias against women at Merrill Lynch. The article prompted us to think about what has and has not changed over the last several decades for the position and harassment of women in corporations.

To the Editor:

Re: "Panel Finds Bias Against Women at Merrill Lynch," by Patrick McGeehan (Front page, April 21 st): As a co-founder of the first group on sexual harassment in the U.S. in 1976, I believe actions like those of Merrill Lynch force the question of what has and hasn't changed in the past 30 years?

The good news is that much of the behavior Merrill Lynch's employees were accused of committing in the 90's would be rare today in large organizations. The bad news is that managers are still rarely rewarded for recognizing and interrupting bias or harassment, especially in its most subtle forms. That means that thousands of people have lost or left their jobs due to this type of hostile treatment.

In a survey of 2500 employees and 400 employers representatively sampled cross the U.S. conducted by our institute and the University of Connecticut Center for Survey Research & Analysis that focused on fairness in the workplace, we found that subtle discrimination replaced overt discrimination. Stereotyping was identified as the most common form of "inappropriate" behavior. 53% of employees of color and 42% of white employees report having been stereotyped at work in the past year. While employees of color experienced more stereotyping, unwanted jokes and remarks, social exclusion, yelling, unwanted sexual teasing, pressure for dates, and bullying, all employees surveyed experienced a fairly high rate of these behaviors – 74% of all employees experienced some kind of offensive behavior in the past year.

Through these findings and over 30 years working to increase workplace fairness and inclusion, I believe that while we may have evolved slowly away from blatant bias in the workplace, we still need to look at more subtle forms of bias facing women and people of color in the workplace. We need to work with executives to further define what constitutes objectionable behavior and how to respond to it. Not until we begin to look at hidden barriers such as stereotyping in the workplace and we begin to connect that bias is bad business, will we be able to truly create fair workplaces for all people in the future.

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