

# Women facing 'massive increase in hostility' in workplace, #MeToo-era study says

By **Katie Johnston** Globe Staff, September 3, 2019, 6:52 p.m.



Meghan Chiampa said that as the only woman on a team of 20 web developers, she was often demeaned by co-workers. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF/GLOBE STAFF

In the two years since the #MeToo movement took off, igniting a firestorm over sexual harassment in the workplace, another form of less incendiary but more insidious gender-based harassment has been building quietly.

Women say they are being subjected to sexism far more than they used to be, according to a new [study](#) out of the University of Colorado Boulder Leeds School of Business — even as they report less overt harassment, such as sexual coercion (“sleep with me and you’ll get a promotion”) and unwanted sexual attention (ogling or fondling).

Women are facing a “massive increase in hostility,” said Stefanie K. Johnson, the business professor who coauthored the study. Research shows that [people in power feel threatened when other groups rise up](#), as women have during the #MeToo era, and that [men believe their status declines when women’s rises](#), which could cause some men to lash out.

“It’s not that the need to subjugate women goes away, I just think it takes a different form,” Johnson said. “Rather than make sexual comments about women, men who are prone to sexually harass will just accuse women of being incompetent.”

Meghan Chiampa is all too familiar with being demeaned by her male co-workers. As the only woman on a team of 20 web developers working onsite at a Boston media company, Chiampa’s requests to present her work at her team’s weekly meeting were ignored. She was never invited to the conferences or hackathons that her colleagues attended. And despite good performance reviews, Chiampa said, she was steered toward nontechnical project management tasks instead of the development work she’d been hired for.

Once, when she mentioned using Excel for data extraction, a male co-worker scoffed, “Oh, my *wife* likes Excel.”

Fed up, Chiampa quit a few weeks ago. (She asked that the company not be named to avoid professional repercussions. The company did not respond to requests for comment). And while she was in the middle of telling her boss how hard it was to be the only woman on the team, he interrupted her: “Nope.”

Then he named a female web developer who didn’t work in the office.

In two surveys of more than 500 full-time professional women between the age of 25 and 45, half polled in September 2016 — a year before the #MeToo movement erupted — and the other half in September 2018, incidents of sexual harassment dropped, according to the University of Colorado study. But gender harassment, defined as negative treatment of women such as making sexist remarks, jumped 16 percentage points, experienced by a staggering 92 percent of women in 2018.

The #MeToo movement — including high-profile accusations against President Trump and now-Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh, as well as a trove of men in entertainment and media, including film producer Harvey Weinstein — has put a glaring spotlight on sexual misconduct. As a result, men have become fearful of being accused, management consultants note, causing them to stop traveling or having closed-door meetings with female co-workers because “they might #MeToo me,” adding to the more subtle forms of discrimination highlighted in the study.

A heightened awareness of inequities in the workplace could also be making women more likely to call out sexist behavior, analysts say.

This type of non-sexual harassment is harder to eradicate than full-on sexual misconduct because it's more ingrained in the culture, said Jodi Detjen, a Suffolk University management professor and cofounder of the gender equity consulting firm Orange Grove Consulting. Everyone knows that sexual harassment is wrong, she said, noting that, “I've not heard a single man say, ‘I can't believe they're making me not touch her anymore.’”

Gender bias, on the other hand, is not as easy to root out.

The events of the past two years have increasingly put men and women at odds, Detjen said, adding to tensions in the workplace.

“It's created a little ‘us and them,’” she said.

Even if more overt forms of sexual harassment have decreased — something Boston employment attorney Rebecca Pontikes is not convinced has happened — she sees sexual

harassment and gender bias as “two sides of the same coin” that can hinder women’s careers.

“It’s the same problem, which is that they see women as sex objects” rather than equals, she said. “They’re just doing something different to act on it.”

Many companies have updated their sexual harassment policies and held training amid the recent cascade of high-profile sexual misconduct allegations, but gender harassment, while also illegal, has not been put under the same microscope. What’s really needed, analysts say, is cultural change: looking at how decisions are made, how meetings are conducted, and how employees are hired, promoted, and evaluated. Getting more women into leadership roles would also help.

Gender bias is a constant in Katie Herzog’s work as president of Eastern Point Consulting Group in Newton, whose clients are mostly law firms. Over the past 25 years, she’s seen women being held back at every organization she’s worked with, she said

When they get pregnant, some are told they’re on the “mommy track,” insinuating that they are no longer career-oriented; a woman trying to start a new venture at her law firm was told to stop making waves, while her male peers were encouraged to take risks.

At a large New York organization, a senior female employee was barred from attending an important meeting with a foul-mouthed client because her colleagues were worried he might offend her. Herzog was astonished: “You’re not her father,” she told a leader at the company.

“It never occurred to them that she could stand up for herself,” Herzog said.

If anything, the diminishment of women in the workplace has become more nuanced in the past two years, said Allison Esposito Medina, founder of Tech Ladies, an online community of 50,000 women involved in the male-dominated field of technology. There may not be as much leering or grabbing, but women who advocate for themselves are being dealt with more harshly, judging from what she’s seen in the Tech Ladies online

forum. Women asking for salary increases are being demoted, and sometimes fired, she said.

“It’s becoming trickier and trickier because people are not doing the really obvious 1950s sexual harassment as much,” she said. “People think, ‘Oh, #MeToo happened, Time’s Up happened, and now everything’s OK.’ ”

But it’s clearly not. These movements, while important, can give men cover to discriminate against women in other ways, said Lauren Stiller Rikleen, the Boston-area president of the Rikleen Institute for Strategic Leadership and author of “The Shield of Silence,” about how the fear of retaliation impedes the reporting of sexual harassment.

Men who don’t want to mentor women or invite them to after-work gatherings can now justify these actions, or lack thereof, by saying they’re trying to protect themselves, and women, from suggestions of impropriety. Beyond being detrimental to a woman’s career, this type of gender exclusion “perpetuates the idea of women as other,” Rikleen said.

“It is another opportunity for your bias to be hidden by trying to sound like you’re doing the right thing,” she said. “I feel like I’m lost in ‘Groundhog Day’ much of the time because I’m having the same conversations with women today that I had 30 years ago.”

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