

## Corporate calculations on sexual harassment have changed

Companies can no longer count on victims to remain silent about abuse

**MARGARET HEFFERNAN**



Corporations and institutions, from Westminster to the church, have been wilfully blind to sexual harassment and bullying for decades

Margaret Heffernan YESTERDAY

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Fifteen years ago, the women’s network of one of the Big Four [accounting firms](#) assembled to consider why so few women achieved partnership. To accelerate deliberations, I interviewed many of the female executives beforehand, integrating their insights and recommendations into my own research about what holds women back: bias, old boy’s networks, family, failure to negotiate, stereotyping, values.

No expense was spared: hundreds assembled in a Ritz ballroom for two days of discussion. But the chief blocker emerged with unequivocal speed: a senior partner in the New York office on the sixth floor. The question became brutally simple: would the firm stick to its policy of gender equality or protect the rainmaker? The guy stayed put.

But now, the Big Four are competing for bragging rights about how many partners they’ve dismissed for [sexual misconduct and bullying](#). So what changed? The Financial Conduct Authority, urged on by the House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee, has begun to take “non-financial conduct” into account when assessing fit and proper persons, acknowledging — at long last — that moral equivocation spreads. Sherron Watkins, the Enron whistleblower, put this more memorably: “Serial killers start with cats.” She argued that minor infractions, unless addressed, presage larger ones.

Companies invested heavily in ethics propaganda — lists of corporate values posted on the walls, unconscious bias training, lofty statements of purpose — but the ultimate expression of ethics isn’t words, but sacrifice: will you fire the partner, or ditch the client, when their values violate your own? If not, the words mean nothing.

Nevertheless, most organisations remained slow to act. Corporations and institutions, from Westminster to the church, have been wilfully blind to [sexual harassment and bullying](#) for decades. At the height of the #MeToo dismissals, I asked a US lawyer how companies were able to fire high-level executives with such confident speed. “It’s simple,” he explained. “We’ve been compiling the

files for years. We had everything we needed.” What has changed isn’t behaviour but jeopardy: the calculation assessing the political, financial value of productive perpetrators versus the reputation risk and cost of exposure.

In the past, it was easier to fire the victims. The companies had power, money and legal might; the abused had only fear and isolation. But the [#MeToo movement](#) has forced a recalculation, because companies can no longer count on victims to remain silent about abuse, assault, management apathy and complicity. This isn’t just about movie stars; watched by the rising generation, the movement has inspired a collective response to danger that starts at university.

For female students, the new, informal curriculum is sexual violence. Groping, harassment, unwanted touching, coercion and assault have become normalised. Victims don’t trust their colleges to do much about it and have learnt instead how to protect themselves: to travel in groups, keep an eye out for each other, never put a drink down lest something be dropped into it, warn each other about predators and always let friends know when they’re home safely. They have learnt the hard way that silence is dangerous, that greater safety lies in sharing information. This is the real power of networks built up over the past 15 years or so. It has little to do with social media and everything to do with the visceral shared experience of abuse.

Talented, ambitious women now enter the workforce alert to where danger lies. Where my generation felt like gatecrashers, securing inclusion through assimilation, younger women no longer accept that they have to pay a higher price for admission. They expect to be taken seriously, to be paid fairly and to work in a place that’s safe. They don’t think that’s a privilege but a right. And instead of feeling, as we often did, that they have to play catch-up, these talented, educated women can sense that they are at the cutting edge. They see that there is a powerful alliance being built here: between women and the young men who suffer abuse too, with ethnic minorities who are also bullied, harassed, undervalued and overlooked, with parents who expect their children to be safe at work and with executives who agonised for years over power they were too scared to use.

When [Deloitte](#) announced that it had dismissed 20 partners in the past four years for reasons of bullying and harassment, it kicked off a PR arms race. Competitors have rushed to flourish similar figures. But why were they silent for so long about doing the right thing? Did they worry they’d lack wholehearted support? Or are they still steeling themselves to tackle the rainmaker on the sixth floor?

*The writer is a former chief executive and the author of ‘Wilful Blindness: How we ignore the obvious at our peril’*

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