

Harassment is alive and well in the workplace

by Michael_Kinsman

It seemed like only moments after a Madison Square Garden got slapped by a New York jury with an \$11.6 million penalty for sexual harassment that two more women decided to sue the company.

Ah, obviously gold diggers. They sense the easy prey and are swooping down.

Not so fast.

If you know anything about sexual harassment complaints in the workplace, you know that things often are pretty out of control before they are filed. The reason is that they are very, very difficult to prove and they leave scars on everybody involved, whether they are victims or innocent people who have been charged with bad conduct.

Reality tells us that very few incidents of sexual harassment ever wind up as formal complaints. Avoiding the alleged perpetrator or finding a new job is often the most palatable solution.

That really serves no purpose.

The number of federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission allegations of sexual harassment have declined significantly over the past decade.

The EEOC reports that while there were 15,989 sexual harassment complaints filed in 1997, there were only 12,025 last year.

Does that mean harassment is less common in today's workplace?

I wouldn't bet on that.

People like Anucha Browne Sanders - who alleged she was harassed by New York Knicks general manager Isiah Thomas, a Madison Square Garden employee - are rare. It takes a very good case and considerable

courage to challenge a company on sexual harassment.

Victims know this. Employers know this. And, perpetrators do, too.

The restaurant and lodging industries have been rife with sexual harassment through the years simply because of the number of young people they employ. One predatory assistant manager in a restaurant can chalk up numerous acts of sexual harassment in a few months because the work environment includes young people who frequently change jobs.

Often the most expedient and effective ways of ending sexual harassment is simply to find another job.

But that doesn't do anything to end on-the-job harassment. The predator moves on to the next victim and there is no public evidence that the harassment occurred.

Certainly, there are various work sites or industries where sexual harassment is more common than in others. But unless this harassment is identified publicly, we give little incentive to employers to take the matter seriously.

EEOC reports that the percentage of sexual harassment claims filed by males in recent years has swelled. A decade ago, 11.6 percent of harassment claims were made by men. Last year, the percent was 15.4 percent.

So just because harassment suits seem to be dwindling, don't be fooled into thinking that harassment is on the decline.

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