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# When Gender, Sex Discrimination, Sexual Harassment and Domestic Violence Come to Work

**Abstract**
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**Keywords**
gender, sex discrimination, sexual harassment, domestic violence, workplace

**Comments**

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CORNELL HR REVIEW

# WHEN GENDER, SEX DISCRIMINATION, SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE COME TO WORK

*Joshua D. Rosenberg Daneri*

Gender discrimination and sexual harassment are still prevalent in the American workplace even though laws against such behaviors have been in place for decades. Last week, K.C. Wagner, the Director of Workplace Issues for the ILR School's Metro District Office in New York City, delivered a presentation in Ives Hall in which she challenged the stereotypes and norms surrounding gender, masculinity, and speaking out against sexual misconduct in the workplace.

To set the stage, Wagner shared a story about her experience as a student in a geometry class in 1966, when her teacher would inappropriately play with her hair. In spite of the fact that she had earned a "D" in the course, a "B" appeared on her report card. Uneasy with the situation, Wagner opted to go to summer school. It wasn't until 1973, when she enrolled in a college course called "Social Stratification Based on Gender," that she was able to identify such experiences as sexual harassment. Before then, the patriarchal mindset of her environment pushed her toward silence. Equipped with a new vocabulary and perspective, Wagner started pursuing women's causes.

After providing a historical timeline of the social movements that resulted in legislation that strengthened the rights of women, Wagner talked about the tendency for individuals to avoid speaking out against harassment in the workplace. Women often fear negative job consequences or allegations of having invited the inappropriate behavior. Many don't know the available avenues through which they might be able to seek help. Her key points for women who find themselves the subjects of sexual harassment in the workplace were the following:

- Recognize and take ownership of the problem
- Describe the issue in terms of behavior, consequences, and feelings
- Avoid evaluating the other person's motives
- Phrase your preferred solution in a way that focuses on common ground
- Mentally rehearse what you will say before you address the other person so your request will be brief and precise

In addition, Wagner encouraged coworkers, managers, or HR professionals who listen to such reports to do the following:

- Listen without being defensive so you can be open to information
- Respond with empathy and genuine interest and concern

- Paraphrase your understanding of the problem and ask questions to clarify issues
- Seek common ground by finding something you can agree with
- Ask for suggestions on how to resolve the situation or generate some of your own

The presentation highlighted the fact that while people generally view gender discrimination and sexual harassment as wrong, they do little to stop such behaviors from happening. It is imperative, then, for managers to constantly remind their workers about the seriousness of such misconduct and to make available channels through which they can be resolved.

While it is common to view harassment and discrimination as workplace problems, many believe that domestic violence is a private affair that is confined to the home. However, Wagner argued that it has become a phenomenon that indirectly affects attendance, productivity, safety, medical costs, and turnover. Much in the same way her course in college allowed her to both identify and codify issues dealing with sexual harassment, Wagner hoped that her presentation would spread awareness of the reality of domestic violence. Contrary to public perception, domestic violence is a widespread phenomenon that transcends race and socioeconomic status. Wagner's presentation aimed to empower victims to speak up when these issues arise, reassuring the audience that the law is on their side. א

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