Abstract

This paper will explore a sexual harassment case brought before the Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission. In 1998 Ms. Silvia Wigg filed a complaint citing sexual harassment from her employer that began in 1995. We will deconstruct her experience through the theoretical lens of anti-oppressive practice while focusing on the details and the process of the case from the time she filed, during the proceedings and hearing, and finally to when the decision and orders for remedy were awarded in 1999. Here we will discuss Ms. Wigg's social location, her experience of intersectionality including sexism, classism and ageism, and contrast her experience of sexual harassment in the workplace with her experience with the Commission. By offering an analysis of the privilege and power held by her employer, the lack of media attention, and implications of this case within a microanalysis, and discussion of cultural implications we aim to better understand how social workers using anti-oppressive practice can impact and empower the lives of individuals experiencing sexual harassment, sexism, and ageism.

Keywords: sexual harassment, workplace, sexism, classism.

From Allegation to Outcome: An Anti-Oppressive Analysis of a Sexual Harassment Hearing at the Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission

Scott Hofstetter, Ronna Mariana, Timena Osborne, Anastazja Pustowka, Clare Wells, & Lindsay Windhager

Locating Oppression

Social Location:

- Ms. Silvia Wigg - 60 year old former employee, wife, and mother living in financial strain
- Mr. Harrison - 57 year old male who is a business owner and husband

Themes of oppression:

- Sexism
- Classism
- Ageism

Evidence Submitted to the Board:

- Ms. Wigg experienced not just one isolated event of sexual harassment, but many.
- Over the years, and after each incident Ms. Wigg spoke with her husband, daughter, and other family members for support. She stayed at her job because she needed the income. She actively looked for another job. She sought medical assistance for the stress. She avoided being alone with Mr. Harrison. She felt in shock after the incidents at work, and felt increased distress and dislocated afterward.
- Ms. Wigg felt she could not tolerate working at Art Pro Litho because of how Mr. Harrison behaved towards her.
- Mr. Harrison was required to take sensitivity training.
- As damages awarded to Ms. Wigg, Mr. Harrison was ordered to give a letter of apology to Ms. Wigg, and to pay Ms. Wigg the sum of $5,000 ($3,500 in general damages and exemplary damages, and $1,200 in lost wages, with 5% interest for the 2 years prior to judgment).
- Mr. Harrison was required to take sensitivity training.

Findings and Outcome

A decision was reached on August 13, 1999.

- The Board found Mr. Harrison clearly did sexually harass Ms. Wigg in the workplace.
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Implications

The law required individualized complaints for a systemic problem and the individual women paid dearly – their lives and livelihood often destroyed along the way. (Backhouse, 289, 2012)

- The personal implications of sexual harassment for Ms. Wigg included financial loss and prolonged psychological and emotional hardships.
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Media Coverage

- No media coverage.
- Possible reasons:
  - Small Reward - around $5,000

Moving Towards Anti-oppressive Practice

Social workers have a responsibility and commitment to pursue anti-oppressive practice strategies interpersonally, organizationally, and structurally. It is important for practitioners not only to understand the meaning of sexual harassment, but to find practical ways to combat it.

Anti-oppressive Practice (AOP):

- Addresses the whole person.
- By using AOP, practitioners will be able to relate to their clients' social context and become aware of knowledge, privilege, oppression and resources in the client-practitioner relationship (Dinnen, 2003).

How sexual harassment can be addressed with clients in direct frontline social work practice:

- Critical consciousness-raising (CCR): key mechanism through which to address and discuss social justice issues and raise awareness about issues such as sexual harassment. This can lead clients and workers to join together in action (Baine, 2011).
- Advocacy as therapy in frontline work - arguing for increased context-specific competency.
- Improving the broader conditions that pertain to gender-based violence and workplace inequity.

Workplace culture and social work practice can be addressed by strategies by Dalrymple and Burke (1995):

- Working collaboratively with colleagues through anti-oppressive perspective.
- Utilizing current policies and legislation to break oppressive practices.
- Awareness of personal oppressions within a theoretical and political framework.
- Workers to position themselves in locations that promote and influence change.

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