**How Sexual Misconduct Threatens the Security Industry**

Real and Reputational Risk

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American society is currently experiencing an unprecedented conversation about sexual misconduct in the [workplace](https://www.securitymagazine.com/keywords/795-security-careers). Industries such as news, entertainment and technology – and more recently, government – have seen male leaders, most of whose long-occurring deviant or dishonorable behaviors were open secrets, fall from grace. Other sectors dominated by men at most levels of employment and certainly in leadership, such as finance, science, law enforcement, intelligence, military, academia and security, have yet to experience similar exposure or upheaval. But do not take this to mean such experiences do not occur, only that victims have not yet felt the security to come forward.

Why not? Well, in her frank [opinion piece](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/30/opinion/im-not-ready-for-the-redemption-of-men.html) for the *New York Times*, actress Amber Tamblyn writes: “Throughout history, women haven’t been in a position to come forward with their stories and be taken seriously as a rule. That’s the reason we sometimes wait 20 years to report something – harassment, assault – if we say anything at all. We haven’t been silent because we forgot or made our stories up. We’ve been silent because we’ve been silenced. But women now feel comfortable telling such stories.”

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Our field is not a well-known profession; our leaders are not celebrities. Women in security remain afraid to discuss the harms incurred in our workplace, because we do not trust our disclosures will be taken seriously. Yet we care deeply about the work, the environment in which it occurs and the field’s capacity to improve as well as grow. So, I will start this important conversation by disclosing my experiences and the experiences of others, but not to just spur discussion in the workplace. The greater goal is to suggest specific ways in which we can work together to make our all colleagues feel welcome at work. Specifically, I write in response to the sincere request of my many right-thinking, well-meaning male friends and colleagues who have asked: “What can we do, and how can we help?”

But first, a disclaimer. I recognize that harassment is perpetrated in many race and gender combinations, but this essay is focused on my experience as a single, straight, white woman in a male-dominated profession. I also acknowledge the privilege of my race and background, which allowed a veneer of shelter unavailable to colleagues of color or those that identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual, whose similar disclosures are uniformly disturbing. I also do not speak for all women, nor do I speak for all women in the security sector. Nonetheless, I am going to guess that many men have no idea we have these experiences, or if they do, they are unsure how to respond or react.

And second, some definitions. Unfortunately, the marketplace is full of lengthy and confusing explanations associated with sexual misconduct, so I have included simple, general definitions. For a deeper-dive, consider Danielle Sepulveres’s *Washington Post* article “[What’s the difference between sexual assault and harassment? Let’s break it down](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/soloish/wp/2017/12/21/whats-the-difference-between-sexual-assault-and-harassment-lets-break-it-down/?hpid=hp_hp-more-top-stories-2_harassment333pm%3Ahomepage%2Fstory&utm_term=.c40ed8ac45ca).” Or better yet, consult your organization’s Human Resources department or employee handbook.

* **Harassment** is about power and the abuse of power. It is illegal and can include “offensive remarks about a person’s sex, unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors.” [See [U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission](https://www.eeoc.gov/laws/types/sexual_harassment.cfm)]
* **Hostile work environment** is a sub-category of harassment referring to “offensive conduct” that “may include, but is not limited to, offensive jokes, slurs, epithets or name calling, physical assaults or threats, intimidation, ridicule or mockery, insults or put-downs, offensive objects or pictures, and interference with work performance.” [See [U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission](https://www.eeoc.gov/laws/types/sexual_harassment.cfm)]
* **Sexual assault**is defined as “any type of sexual contact or behavior that occurs without the explicit consent of the recipient.” Examples include forced sexual intercourse, attempted rape, child molestation, incest, and fondling and forcible sodomy. [See the [U.S. Department of Justice](https://www.justice.gov/ovw/sexual-assault)]
* **Sexual or gender-based misconduct** is a convenient catchall phrase for a wide variety of inappropriate behaviors. However, there is no specific, agreed-upon legal definition. In my experience, and those of my colleagues, these ills range from the occasional dirty joke or sexual innuendo and the digs and slights meant to remind a colleague that she is unworthy or unwelcome to the criminal acts of harassment and assault.

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Furthermore, it is critical to recognize that the definition of the workplace is not bound by the building, floor or suite where we work. The work environment also encompasses other locations where the primary purpose of the gathering is related to employment. In fact, for the majority of us who work in small offices or organizations, our exposure to such misconduct occurs off-site – tradeshows, conferences, subject-specific trainings, sponsored-industry events – where perpetrators may feel the rules are relaxed or because the target is not a co-worker, but just a colleague.

**Workplace Misconduct Discredits Individuals and Damages the Profession**

As a “travel security” professional, my specific community routinely acknowledges the “special risks” faced by females, minority or LGBTQ travelers, but it also fails to recognize the harms we may face within our own organizations stateside. How long will these impacts go unnoticed before recruitment or retention is affected? As our clientele becomes more and more diverse, so should those hired to serve them, yet women are especially unlikely to pursue a career in an industry with a reputation for workplace mistreatment, including exclusion or dismissal due to perceived youth and inexperience. For example, how many men reading this essay have had the following experiences in the performance of their duties?

* Been nicknamed “kiddo” or “little lady” by a colleague or a boss
* Praised for hard work with “Good girl” or “Good boy”
* Been asked if you were at an industry event as part of a “school field trip?”
* Patted on the head as praise
* Received an unexpected backrub from a colleague during a reception
* Greeted with a “wolf whistle” at work, by someone you do not know
* Told you were “more attractive” before you cut your hair
* Suggested that you should “hook up” with a newly single colleague
* Been repeatedly asked by a vendor who *really* makes the decisions around here
* Criticized by colleagues for the length of your skirt or the cut of your suit
* Informed that the placement of your nametag emphasized your ample bust

Each and every one of these has happened either to me, or to one of my female colleagues. If you had these experiences in the workplace, on- or off-site, you may think twice about staying in that job or that industry, or encouraging others to join the profession. You also may be thinking, though, that in isolation, and certainly compared with what we are hearing in the news lately, these incidents might be deemed merely “unpleasant” or “uncomfortable” – even understandably “expected” in an environment that has been nearly exclusively male for decades. The point is that there is a cumulative effect of having these experiences over and over again in variety of contexts, which is to remind us that we remain unwelcome or unworthy.

Writer Jane Mayer, in a [conversation](https://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=567430106) with Terry Gross on “Fresh Air” in November 2017, provides excellent insight into why that seemingly harmless behavior has long-term consequences for us and the workplace as a whole:

“If a guy tells a joke, a dirty joke or an offensive joke in a staff meeting, the harm done to a woman who is in that staff meeting, for instance, is not in the joke itself. It's that her reaction to the joke, her response to it can then contribute to her professional future. Is she going to be liked less by her colleagues and her bosses? Is she going to be viewed as a threat because she doesn't play along? The harm isn't in the initial offense. *The harm is in the accumulated energy that women have to spend navigating this stuff through so many stages of their careers*.”

Exactly! When I share the examples above, most (including other women) respond with, “well, why didn’t you say this or that?” (which aggravatingly puts the responsibility on the recipient to stop the behavior – not, to say the least, a helpful response). Even the cleverest, most successful security professional has difficulty finding an appropriate comeback or response to an incident like the examples listed above because despite routine exposure, we are always shocked that it is happening *yet again*! So then we kick ourselves for years afterward for not responding quickly or sharply enough – even at the risk of professional backlash – contributing to the guilt that by not addressing inappropriate behavior every chance we get, we are quietly condoning it.

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And even beyond the profound effect abuse has on the victim, consider the effect that allegations or instances of abuse – physical, sexual, verbal, emotional – has on organizations. Security professionals are tasked with addressing reputational risk as well as physical risk, but are our own departments and industry doing enough to avoid being a risk to the enterprise as a whole?

After the events of the past year, can anyone deny that several companies, such as The Weinstein Group, have suffered extreme impacts after allegations of sexual abuse and misconduct come to light?

As victims feel increasingly empowered to disclose their experiences, the negative impacts will range from decreased morale, intrapersonal workplace conflicts, internal investigations, public shaming and potential lawsuits. On the other hand, organizations that choose to address these issues in meaningful ways will experience positive outcomes: increased workplace satisfaction, retention and advancement. Ignoring the problem is no longer an option. The door of disclosure has been kicked wide open, and singer/musician [Janelle Monae](http://www.latimes.com/95780629-132.html), speaking at the 2018 Grammy awards, defined our approach: “We come in peace, but we mean business.”

**The First Steps Are Shockingly Simple**

The problem of sexual harassment in the workplace will not be solved by the wealthy, famous or powerful losing their jobs or their social status; it will be solved by ordinary men and women who not only model appropriate behaviors for their subordinates, but who have explicit conversations with such individuals about what is and isn’t appropriate in the workplace (or any place), and by actively intervening in cases where unacceptable behaviors are observed.

“The first step to solving this problem is acknowledging that one exists at all.”

But before we speak, we need assurances that our voices will be heard and taken seriously, that we will not be told to “lighten up” or to “calm down” or worse, excluded from opportunities or experiences that offer professional growth because someone might say something that could offend us and then we’ll complain only to ruin the whole experience for everyone as if the workplace were an elementary school playground. We also need assurances, and so do the long-suffering good men who’ve watched their supervisors or colleagues treat their co-workers in ways that make their skin crawl or their blood boil, that they will also be believed…and not bullied, excluded or let go.

In the meantime, here are some suggestions to create a more inclusive and supportive workplace community.

**Mirror the conversations you are having with your male colleagues with your female colleagues, especially during workplace social settings, whether it be the break room or the ballroom reception**.  
For example, when talking about that super-interesting analysis of the Mogadishu bombings, don’t turn to us and ask about our kids. This makes us feel like you think we aren’t interested in the work at hand, even if you are genuinely interested in our children. Trust me, we want to talk about the work, too.

**Introduce us to your colleagues by our full names and titles/institutions.**  
As representatives of the low-status double-minority at industry events (“young” + female), it’s vital to validate our professional standing. While we may indeed be “charming/lovely/talented,” leave that type of introduction to our spouses or partners. If someone else uses such adjectives or monikers to introduce someone in your presence, make a clear point of asking a question that allows for presentation of title/rank and description of responsibilities.

**Acknowledge observed bad behavior, even if you can’t stop it.**  
We get that the back-rubber is creeping you out, too! And yet, that guy is likely a mover and a shaker in our professional world, so punching him out isn’t going to end well for you. Turn to us and say, “I saw what happened there, and I am really sorry.” We will be grateful that you noticed, because the first step to solving this problem is acknowledging that one exists at all.

**Listen with compassion and do not suggest what you would have done in that circumstance**.  
When a colleague discloses an incident of sexual misconduct, intimidation or dismissal, do not immediately respond by suggesting what she or he should have done or what you would have done in that situation. This person just took a giant leap of faith to share an uncomfortable workplace experience with you; do not response with advice. Just listen. Then, inquire about what the organization as well as its employees can do to prevent such incidents in the future.

**Encourage employee dialogue on the subject.**  
Every workplace is having conversations about sexual misconduct, either openly or behind closed doors. Create productive opportunities for everyone in the organization to discuss sexual misconduct, its impacts, allowing employees to suggest mitigation and long-term improvements. The women in your organization may be feeling particularly testy these days**–**acknowledge and embrace it.

**Be attentive to non-verbal signs seeking intervention**.  
Particularly in workplace social settings, where alcohol is in abundant supply, be mindful of our over-served peers who lose their professional composure and engage in inappropriate topics or touching, and intervene. Again, these are often powerful men with influence in our profession, so making a scene with a few colorful insults or a drink in the face is not an option for us, or for you. Instead, facilitate graceful leave-taking. “Julie, I have been looking for you everywhere, come meet XYZ.” We need you to join the Predator Prevention Posse.

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It is tempting to suggest that these behaviors are part of the “old guard,” who will soon retire and be replaced by more progressive males. Unfortunately, the perpetrators of these experiences represent a wide age range – and some of the most gracious and welcoming men of this community have been or are some of our most seasoned colleagues. The sad truth is that perpetrators of assault, harassment or just plain “creepiness” come in all ages, shapes and sizes, but one “quality” they share is status, either within the profession, their organization or their community, and they most likely behave this way over and over and over again.

**A Charge to Leadership: Look Inward for Answers**

And, for those of you reading this who are in a position of power to effectuate change in your organization, it’s time to take a good, hard look at the workplace you control and ask if it is inclusive, supportive and fair.

* Is your training on appropriate workplace behavior comprehensive enough?
* Are bad-behaving, high-performers getting a pass for their misdeeds?
* Do you address the equitable treatment of women and minorities as well as those who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered?
* Do those who feel harmed, excluded or discriminated against have viable means to report the problem without fear of retaliation?
* Do those who witness such harm have avenues of reporting that won’t result in retaliation or social exclusion?
* Are there invisible barriers to advancement for these individuals in your organization?

In a December 2017 article for the *New York Times*, “[The Cost of Devaluing Women](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/02/opinion/sunday/the-cost-of-devaluing-women.html),” Sallie Krawcheck references [numerous studies](https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/why-diversity-matters) that show “companies with more diversity, and particularly more women in leadership, offer higher returns on capital, lower risk and greater innovation than firms without such leadership….” Therefore, by diversifying the voices of those who manage health and safety risks, organizations improve the workplace environment and become more productive or profitable at the same time. Now who wouldn’t want to be responsible for that?

We have a chance to make a difference in a professional environment that is relatively small and, like so many others, on the cusp of change. I believe the good men and women of our community can help make it happen. Let’s go out there and prove it.