Why do some victims keep silence when they encounter sexual harassment?

In October 2017, Harvey Weinstein, a famous movie producer in Hollywood, was accused of harassing more than 60 women for at least 30 years (Malley, 2017). This event caused a huge and devastating blow to Weinstein’s career. At the same time, this event provokes an increasing amount people to be concerned about the issue of sexual harassment in workplace. While there is growing concern about sexual harassment, victims of harassment generally still stay silent because of the shame harassment brings them and the social conditions that prohibit them from speaking up.

Normally, sexual harassment refers to unwanted physical contact in a sexual manner or compulsive sexual behavior. For example, on the subway, fondling an unknown woman stealthily belongs to the sexual harassment category. However, this understanding of sexual harassment is not complete. According to Merriam Webster Dictionary, sexual harassment is “uninvited and unwelcome verbal or physical behavior of a sexual nature especially by a person in authority toward a subordinate (such as an employee or student)”. In other words, any deliberate touch on body, indecent suggestions on verbal or social network, and compulsive sexual behavior are considered
to be sexual harassment. Furthermore, when people talk about sexual harassment, it is identified as an event targeted at women. However, sexual harassment can happen on everyone, including men. Malley (2017) notes that “Harassment can occur between men and women or between people of the same gender, and it applies to gay and transgender employees as well”. In addition, according to the chapter 12 from “Sexual harassment: developments in federal law”, Feder (2008) introduces the gap among this law. That is, there are no relevant stipulate about how to punish the crime when sexual harassment happens between man to man. The attention paid to men in sexual harassment situation is not as significant as that paid to women in sexual harassment situation. People should treat sexual harassment from a complete view, instead of a confined view.

After reporting out the scandal of Harvey Weinstein, more and more victims choose to stand up. Angelina Jolie is one of victims. Among these victims, many have said that they were harassed by Harvey Weinstein at young age. Obviously, they have lots of opportunities to report Weinstein; however, instead of reporting this scandal to the public, they chose to keep silence. In fact, there are plenty of victims who have suffered sexual harassment, but have kept silence.

According to research from CQ magazine (2018), 27 percent of women and 4
percent of men have been harassed, while 53 percent and 42 percent, respectively, said that they knew someone who also had been harassed. From this data, it is obvious that sexual harassment is around us and it happens to most of women and men. However, there are still researches showing that, among these victims, many of them choose to keep silence.

The behavior of keeping silence after sexual harassment can be explained as stemming from the shame brought by victims themselves and social conditions, including the level of education, shame from both men and women, and the implement of relevant law. To be specific, the level of education directly determines how people are perceived by others. In other words, the victims who have higher level of education are more likely to protect their own right and report such violation, since they know how to use laws to protect themselves. Moreover, shame is a determination as well since victims of sexual harassment often are afraid of reporting what offenders did to them. From some men’s point of view, they think being harassed by other man or woman is shameful. Also, comparing to the level of education and the shame from victims, the implement of relevant law indirectly plays an indispensable role on the response of being harassed.

The level of education is one of these reasons why some victims choose to keep silence when they encounter sexual harassment. In India, almost 95 people in average are sexually harassed every day. This is a huge amount for sexual harassment. According to a research of sexual harassment in India, which is from Silva and Asok (2017), 21 percent of victims keep silence after being harassed. 28 percent of victims
avoid talking about being harassed. This is because of the system in India and victims’ education levels. To be specific, most of India’s citizens ignore women’s social status. Women occupy lower or even lowest social status in India. They even think women do not need be educated. The only thing they can do, in these citizens’ view, is to stay at home and take care of family members. Due to this consistent viewpoint, women in India are afraid of reporting the offenders and protecting their own rights. They think it is shameful. Through their lives, nobody has taught them to protect their right, although the environment they live in is not favorable for them. According to what Gu and Strivastava (2009) said, “some women who were sexually harassed found to be so naive that they did not even understand the nature of the wrong perpetrated by their male counterparts, indicating a lack of public education” (p.47). In other words, the level of education can be a factor leading victims to choose different responds after being sexually harassed. If governments make efforts on education, sexual harassment cases will decrease because most of people are educated, and they know how to protect themselves.

By making efforts on education, not only sexual harassment cases will decrease, but also people can realize the seriousness of sexual harassment. However, it is undeniable that, sometimes, shame also plays a key role in how victims react to sexual harassment. “the shaming of women also promotes an environment of self-blame”, said by Silva and Asok (2017), “which makes it than much less likely that women will feel empowered to speak up or to report such violation to authorities after the fact”. From what Silva and Asok said, we know that the victims of sexual harassment are afraid of
reporting what offenders did to them because it is shameful to being harassed. Other people, who may not have encountered this violation, treat these victims with negative bias. Some people in the world, treat the victims of sexual harassment with negative opinion on the grounds that they think having this experience is shameful and ruins a person’s reputation; for example, a woman who is harassed might be perceived as dishonorable to her family and her husband. Due to this opinion, the victims are afraid of speaking up because they care about what others think about them. Furthermore, people who do not encounter sexual harassment do not understand and give enough care and compassion to victims. As John Stuart Mill said, “There are many truths of which the full meaning cannot be realized until personal experience has brought it home”, which means people, who have not experienced sexual harassment “will never exactly know what a person feels, experiences, or acts like after the horrible violation happens to them” (Posluszny, 2015, p.48). This is also what makes victims are afraid of talking about sexual harassment because few people understand them. It is difficult to show scar to the public because it is a painful experience for the victim to relive and talk about. As a result, shame forms, and it is a leading factor prohibiting victims from speaking up.

Furthermore, Sexual harassment is not only an issue about women, but also an issue about men. “A woman can rape a man, and this crime occurs far more often than most imagine” (Philip, 1948). When we talk about sexual harassment, we always connect it to women, instead of men. Conversely, we should pay more attention to men’s sexual harassment experience. From the view of men, being harassed as man is
also a reason for them to keep silence, since men are usually the one who commits sexual harassment. Moreover, men, in this society, are viewed as higher status than women. They will think it is shameful being harassed. However, having been harassed is not shameful. Victims, whether women or men, should protect their rights.

Besides education and shame, the implement of relevant laws also can affect this issue. Usually, obtaining evidence is difficult for sexual harassment cases. This is because victims do not know when they will experience sexual harassment and they cannot recall the exactly location and time. It is almost impossible to predict sexual harassment. All those factors make obtain evidence difficult. Therefore, if there are no evidence, courts or police cannot put on record so they cannot distribute resources to track criminals.

As I mentioned regarding the Harvey Weinstein scandal, more and more victims are willing to expose what Weinstein did. From the view of psychology, it is called herd mentality. In other words, it seems that other victims were following what the first victim did; however, it is not just following the first victim’s actions. After the first victim exposed what Weinstein did, this event was paid attention by an increasing amount people. The attention from people paves the way for victims to be not silent since people’s attention provide them guarantee to protect their own rights. The fact of sexual harassment can be hidden because the shame from victims and social conditions. If we help them overcome the barriers they face regarding reporting sexual harassment, as well as work to make it more acceptable to report harassment through laws and practical actions, maybe the frequency of sexual harassment will decrease or even no
longer exist on the grounds that there are many and growing amount concerns about sexual harassment. In the future, many “Harvey Weinstein” will get punished if victims do not keep silence when they encounter sexual harassment.
Reference


