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How should the media portray women? Shouldn't the media's power be harnessed towards changing society's perception of women and in doing so, must be sensitive enough to strike that balance of portraying women in more diversified roles and capacities? Read this thought-provoking article on Leaderonomics.com. Go to: bit.ly/womenmedia1

POWER AT PLAY?

A NEW FORWARD-THINKING HR STAND IS NEEDED TO COMBAT SEXISM



By **NANCY SY SIM-LIM**
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SUSAN Fowler created the first wave in early 2017. Then Amber Anderson, Cynthia Burr and Lysette Anthony launched the second. These are victims from all ages. Young, middle-aged and the elderly. There were 84 of them in total.

Silicon Valley, Hollywood, media and the entertainment industry. These are places where names and fortunes are made. It was the tipping point. Nearly every industry had a victim.

Aziz Ansari, Harvey Weinstein, Dr Larry Nassar, Matthew Lauer, Roy Price, Charlie Rose, Martin Timell – the list got longer each week. These were the alleged perpetrators.

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

The #MeToo campaign, which has evolved globally and now promotes solidarity, gave a voice to the new movement. If you have been reading the news, the movement and the problem needs no mention.

These were the new names that have been feeding our media appetite for the last few months. But wait.

When Fowler's blog entry went viral and made its way into the media, many only took notice because of our familiarity with Uber as a peer-to-peer, ride-sharing global company.

It was not because Fowler was frustrated and intimidated. Her issue did not receive a legitimate response. It didn't help that human resources (HR) didn't recognise there was an organisational issue and claimed that the perpetrator was a high performer.

Only when Travis Kalanick was ousted as chief executive officer (CEO) of Uber and the Weinstein victims emerged as one voice, did the topic escalate to where it is today. Only then, did people at the top sit, listen and take action.

POWER AND CULTURE AT PLAY

The problem found a name for itself. So, what is it about sexual harassment (SH) that has dominated conversations today?

Much has to do with **why** it has been ignored, and if there is a permanent solution.

It also has to do with power and culture where sexual perversion and sexism are allowed to thrive.

Two common themes have developed for SH.

1 Power dynamics in institutions

In Silicon Valley for example, this is a big challenge. It is a location where technology, talent and tension thrive. It's a place where chauvinism seems to be the culture.

It inhibits victims from speaking up. Those who know, have looked the other way especially if the perpetrator is someone rich, powerful and talented.

Victims are often young and in need of economic support, and the fear of reprisal prevents them from speaking up.



2 Who should we blame?

When we look deeper, the HR profession was the first to take the big hit. This was most evident in Fowler's case.

Liane Hornsey, the new chief HR officer at Uber received a lot of criticisms and the support of Arianna Huffington who is also on Uber's board.

So, with months of media frenzy on the topic of SH, how should individuals and organisations move on from here?

The *Time* magazine Persons of the Year 2017 – *The Silence Breakers* brought together a bunch of strange bedfellows.

Why did it create so much solidarity in such a short time? Have the complaints gone too far?

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

In the 1980s, when I was an employee of a leading Asian airline, a couple of us – employees who were working on ground and flying – happened to have a chat on the nature in which our pre-employment medical check-up was done.

We realised that when we were examined for "fit for employment" by a male doctor, he touched our breasts and checked us in the absence of a nurse or hospital assistant.

We didn't have a label for our problem then. Today, we could have probably sued the clinic and our organisation for not protecting us.

My then air stewardess colleague also affirmed that she once went in for a common cold but was told to strip down to nothing.

So, the problem is systemic and we young ladies were taken advantage of.

This experience and conversation bothered me for many years. It was only when I became a HR head later in my life that I knew I had the power to speak up and eventually do something about it.

Back then, jobs were scarce, and many young girls were vying for a career in the airline. You would see hundreds of them queuing up at hotel lobbies for interviews to join an airline.

Our elders also didn't guide us much to speak up against the medical profession. We were compliant.

HR PROFESSIONALS CAN TAKE THE LEAD

When Fowler's story broke, I had a couple of calls from non-HR professionals and was in chatrooms where the HR profession was beaten up. Badly.

Why didn't we do something? Why have we failed to protect women in the workplace? Are we here to protect the company or the employee?

So, here's my take.

1 Expansion of women's influence in HR

Traditionally, HR jobs have been male-dominated. Women's domination of HR only escalated in the 1990s when HR services grew in demand especially with outsourcing and offshoring.

To be very good in designing HR policies and advocating them to the senior leaders, you would need to have worked for large multinational companies or government-linked companies that subscribe to forward-thinking HR practices.

You would also need to be exposed to good practices and have a very strong educational foundation. Introducing policies would be both top-down and bottom-up approaches and often, we are impacted by regulatory changes or pressures from external environments.

Change is needed to stay sustainable and to remain competitive in the eyes of a dynamic workforce.

You would also need to be a company that promotes diversity and inclusion (D&I) and equal employment opportunities (EEO). This is a new 'term' in some of our organisations.

Those who have not worked in such an environment would not know how to initiate such a conversation, write and advocate such policies. And peers are hard to influence. They are busy doing other things.

I see young HR managers struggling and the journey is lonely as they are often expected to fight many battles on the HR front – people attraction, retention, business growth – while trying to keep everyone 'happy'.

McKinsey Global Survey 2015 indicated that the presence of women in the C-suites and boards was lacking and had a long way to go.

HR has been struggling to get a voice in the boardroom for many years. It was Dave Ulrich and his book *HR Champions* in 1996 that began to bring HR back to its respectable place.

2 Clarity and ownership

Organisations that want to start looking at EEO and D&I must know

where to park these initiatives in their leadership structure.

Uber's HR head was not reporting directly to Kalanick. The previous head was not Hornsey but Renee Atwood, and she reported to Ryan Graves who was the head of operations.

Should this be an initiative under the CEO's office, HR's ambit, the chief culture officer, or the chief sustainability officer?

Most local organisations have an Industrial Relations/Employee Relations department to promote and handle SH-related matters.

However, such issues might not be as rampant and as such, SH prevention initiatives might not garner the attention it warrants.

3 Availability of support and processes

Once this policy is rolled out, it should be reviewed.

Like the whistleblowing policy, there must be governance and processes built in place in the organisation, and how the community is relying on such existence.

Actress Ashley Judd who was one of Weinstein's complainants said, "There wasn't a place to report such experiences."

4 Champion the cause

Will organisations champion SH this time or will they be too embarrassed to handle it?

Over in the United States and Asia, stories of SH continue to emerge daily. Many are jumping on the bandwagon and running state-by-state programmes on how to manage and prevent sexual harassment in the workplace.

We also need to look deeper as SH happens in every sector, industry and function. From young gymnasts to hardworking nurses in the healthcare business, perpetrators have attempted to cause harm to them.

IN CONCLUSION

If you are new to this, just look for Eric H. Holder's 47 recommendations on how Uber can be a better place to work.

Most of all, leadership at the top and HR must find a new partnership, agree on its culture and find a moral compass to navigate this. Only then will SH receive the attention it warrants.

Like Liane, many of us in the C-suites and HR have our work cut out for us.

■ Nancy is a HR consultant and coach. She also leads her own HR practice. Email us at editor@leaderonomics.com should you have a burning question you want to ask on this topic.