

WORKPLACE HARASSMENT A COMPLEX ISSUE

In October, the publication *Axios* touted the Harvey Weinstein sexual harassment fallout as a “cultural revolution.” Amid hundreds of revelations across U.S. business and government workplaces, a newfound resolve had emerged: Sexual harassment must be stamped out. Yet the celebration was both premature and bittersweet.

To be sure, objectification of women has been a driving force in gender discrimination. But the harms women endure on the job are much broader, including workplace bullying from other women and from male cliques that seek to demoralize and derail high-performing women.

Workplaces are neither civilized nor meritocratic. And the mental frame of separate and unequal roles for women and men (embodied in religion, sports, traditions, and rituals) still has its nasty grip. As recently as 2016, *The Wall Street Journal*, in covering women’s workplace challenges, included an article on daycare (presumably because they considered it to be a woman’s issue) — and reminded me of Scott Pierce (Barbara Bush’s brother) who remarked in the 1980s that one major problem with installing a daycare at Prudential

where we worked was that male workers might then want to take advantage of the facility!

On top of longstanding concerns, male anger is on the rise. In the last couple of years, male public company board members have begun to gripe to me that the emphasis on board gender diversity has made it difficult for them to capture additional board seats. My standard reply? “Women still occupy less than 20 percent of U.S. board seats and even now have been gaining only one-third of new board seats available — so if you do the math, you’ll see you have nothing to worry about.”

Research demonstrates that both women and men need to raise their expectations for female workplace success. In October, *The Washington Post* reported that a 2017 survey of more than 70,000 employees showed “in companies where just one in 10 senior leaders is female, nearly 50 percent of men said women were ‘well represented’ in the senior ranks, compared with only one-third of women who — somewhat remarkably — said the same.”

Some solutions would be easy to implement, if the will existed. Unequal pay could be fixed by eliminating ranges of pay for specific jobs and awarding team rather than individual bonuses. Quotas at every rank could be installed to retrain expectations. I know of no company that has been harmed by installing quotas for board member diversity, as are required in countries such as Norway. It would be easy to require that one of every two senators and every other president be a woman. And these fixes could also help address destructive, hyper-competitive work cultures.

More difficult are ingrained biases. But here science has become a new friend, showing us that male and female are no longer simply defined. “To varying extents, many of us are biological hybrids on a male-female continuum,” *Scientific American* reported in September. I look forward to the day when we can truly relate to each other as hybrids. And when that happens, it will be time to bust out the bubbly.

ELEANOR BLOXHAM (Louisiana State University) is the founder and CEO of The Value Alliance and Corporate Governance Alliance, a board and senior executive education, information, and advisory firm. Bloxham has a bachelor’s in English from Louisiana State University and an MBA from New York University’s Stern School of Business. She is a regular contributor to *Fortune* and the author of two books. She may be reached at ebloxham@thevaluealliance.com.