

# Men at the top play by different rules, expert says

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Gary Powell, professor emeritus of business, is an internationally recognized scholar and educator on gender, diversity, and work-family issues in the workplace. He has also served as chair of the Women in Management (now Gender and Diversity in Organizations) division of the Academy of Management, and is a prolific author. As accusations against American film producer and former film studio executive Harvey Weinstein mount, Powell discusses the issue of sexual harassment with UConn Today.

**Q: The accusations against movie producer and executive Harvey Weinstein are mind boggling. If true, how could this misconduct have gone for 30 years without someone intervening?**

A: First, let me say emphatically that the accusations against Harvey Weinstein – quid pro quo [sexual harassment](#), sexual assault, rape, etc. – are disgusting, appalling, and horrific. Such behavior is absolutely intolerable in any setting, be it a work relationship, company, or society. But are the accusations "mindboggling"? That depends on one's perspective.

Let's consider the situation in which Weinstein's alleged despicable behavior occurred. First, he was the founder of his company, which places him in a strong power position. Second, he was the CEO, which makes him the most powerful employee in the organization. Third, his

company was highly successful in its industry, gaining much industry acclaim and numerous awards for its movies and the actresses (and actors) in them. Fourth, he was a highly visible representative of his company in the industry; everybody knew Harvey Weinstein. Fifth, he worked in an industry in which the term "casting couch" was coined. According to Wikipedia, "The term 'casting couch' originated in the motion picture industry, with specific reference to couches in offices that could be used for sexual activity between casting directors or film producers and aspiring actors."

This situation created the context in which Weinstein's behavior was possible and he could get away with it. For a woman to cross Weinstein by rejecting his advances, especially if she was an aspiring actress, would be to risk her entire acting career. Not only could he punish her by keeping her out of his movies, he could also suggest to others in the industry that she is "difficult to work with" or otherwise slander her professional reputation, which could keep her career from ever getting started or taking off.

In short, Weinstein was in a strong power position in his company and industry, which could have allowed him to get away with all he is accused of doing. In contrast, the women who were allegedly harassed, assaulted, and/or raped by Weinstein were in a weak power position. As I discuss in my book, *Women and Men in Management*, power differentials due to the hierarchical structure of most organizations allow higher-level employees to use the promise of rewards or the threat of punishments to obtain sexual gratification from lower-level employees.

This is how Weinstein could get away with all he did for so long.

**Q: What does it say about gender roles in the workplace when we are inundated with these**

**accusations against powerful men, such as Fox News chairman Roger Ailes, Fox News host Bill O'Reilly, and comedian and actor Bill Cosby?**

A: Note that all of these examples are of men in the media and entertainment industry. Accusations have also been made against powerful men in other industries and companies for either engaging in sexual harassment or fostering an environment in which sexual harassment was prevalent and ignored (except by the victims), including CEOs of American Apparel (Dov Charney), Uber (Travis Kalanick), and more.

What does this say about [gender roles](#)? Not much. I think it says more about how people can abuse their power. In major corporations, virtually all men at lower levels have learned that even if they are inclined to harass women, they risk their employment and livelihood if caught. Men at the top play by different rules.

**Q: Some have said this is a watershed moment for women in business. Do you agree?**

A: I don't know. I think we need to wait and see. If the popular media, which have a notoriously short attention span, move on to other issues after a week devoted to this one and the general public forgets about Weinstein, not much will have changed.

On the other hand, what is noteworthy with this situation is how many now-powerful and prominent women in the industry (e.g., Gwyneth Paltrow, Angelina Jolie) are speaking up about what they were subjected to by Weinstein. Instead of being ashamed about what happened and staying silent, they are being empowered and raising their voices. In so doing, they may empower other women to speak up if/when they

experience similar behavior.

**Q: What do you think boards of directors are saying now behind closed doors?**

A: "How did this happen?" "What was he thinking?" "Now that this has gone public, we need to do something to make it look like we care!" (etc.)

**Q: What advice do you give young women (and men) as they enter the workforce? What can they do to protect themselves from workplace predators?**

A: First, if you are subjected to unwanted sexually-oriented behavior, you need to let someone know about it. You can't keep it to yourself and suffer in silence. If you stay silent, you will not find out how many supporters, and how much support, you really have from both women and men. Most men as well as most women find such behavior as despicable as I do. Also, if you stay silent, you might find yourself wondering what you did to provoke the behavior, which is not a productive line of thought. You do not deserve to be treated in the way that Weinstein allegedly treated [women](#).

Second, if someone tells you that she/he has been a target of unwanted sexually-oriented behavior, you offer all the emotional support you can. This is part of what makes you a decent human being.

Third, if you witness an incident of unwanted sexually-oriented behavior, you intervene or interrupt it, even if it places your career at risk. This is also part of what makes you a decent human being.

Fourth, if you work in an organization that has a human resources

department and sexual harassment policy (and most organizations do), you report the behavior. If the organization is smart, it will have a pre-established policy that will protect your anonymity and confidentiality while investigating such an incident if at all possible.

Finally, speaking as an upper-level Green Belt in the Tang Soo Do style of martial arts, I recommend self-defense training for everyone. Hopefully you will never need to use it outside of the martial arts school you attend, but you never know.

**Q: Are you optimistic that we will see in the next generation a workplace free of sexual harassment?**

A: No.

**Q: What would it take to reduce the level of sexual harassment that is occurring in organizations?**

A: On October 13, the Wall Street Journal reported that Fidelity Investments fired a star (male) stock picker for allegedly sexually harassing a junior female employee. He was said to be one of the firm's most well-known fund managers. The firing decision was made by Abigail Johnson, CEO and granddaughter of the firm's founder.

Hmmm, would it take more female CEOs, the numbers of whom are very small right now, to reduce the level of sexual harassment in the workplace? Speaking personally and as a scholar of gender issues in the workplace, I hope that we get the chance to find out.

Provided by University of Connecticut

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