

## **SEXUAL ASSAULT IN THE WORKPLACE**

### **Statistics**

- Rape and sexual assault comprise 2.1% of all workplace victimizations, accounting for an average of 36,500 incidents annually. *Duhart, D. Violence in the Workplace 1993-99, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2002.*
- Rape and sexual assault were reported to police at the lowest percentage (24%) when compared to other violent crimes in the workplace. *Ibid.*
- In 2000, 36% of rape/sexual assault victims lost more than 10 days of work after their victimization. *Ibid.*

### **Overview of the Issue**

- Workplace sexual assault includes increasingly aggressive harassment, exploitation, indecency, and attempted or completed rape. It can be perpetrated by a co-worker, a client or customer, a stalker, a stranger or by an intimate partner or family member as a spillover of domestic violence.
- Sometimes sexual assault in the workplace is less intrusive or visible, consisting of unwanted contact, groping or fondling. Sometimes it is violent and traumatic. Either way, it is a criminal act and harmful to the victim.
- Formal and informal structures of many organizations remain male-centered and emphasize sex boundaries in friend and work relations. This denies women of their voice and their ability to end inappropriate language and behavior. Such an environment is conducive to harassment and assault, even if it does not overtly encourage it.

### **What You Can Do**

- Educate yourself on protective workplace laws. If seeking a protection order, have it also apply to the workplace. You do not have to go to work if you feel unwell, unsafe or threatened or if the perpetrator still has access there.
- Talk to someone. Get a forensic sexual assault exam. Seek legal and counseling assistance.
- Employers can take responsibility for ensuring a safer workplace by providing sexual assault/domestic violence awareness training for employees and management. Investigate complaints, use threat assessment tools, have clear-cut and enforceable policies and codes of conduct, and take legal and disciplinary action.
- Employers can also provide resources and referrals for victims, help create workplace safety plans for at-risk employees, allow changes in work routines and job location and provide personal leave options.

### **Impact on Victims**

- Victims of workplace sexual assault may experience disbelief or confusion, particularly if the incident was brief or they cannot recall details. This may lead to denial, especially if they feel they cannot prove it.
- Someone who is assaulted by a co-worker or while at work experiences unique consequences. S/he may no longer feel physically safe at work and may fear retaliation by the assailant or employer. S/he may also fear that reporting the assault could lead to an invasion of privacy or may jeopardize his/her position or career.
- Sexual violence or assault in the workplace may diminish the victim's work functioning and attendance rates. Within the workplace, it may negatively affect employee productivity, sense of safety, retention and absenteeism.

### **Quotable**

Sexual assault in any setting is traumatic. A workplace experience may result in risks to the victim's privacy, career prospects and even livelihood. Employers need to work with employees, Employee Assistance Programs and law enforcement to create safer workplace environments.