

Fear of gossip and scandal may keep women out of top jobs

Katie Gibbons

Male bosses avoid being alone with women to prevent accusations of sexual harassment, experts claim.

Their findings suggest that workers need lessons on how to interact with the opposite sex.

The allegations against Harvey Weinstein, the Hollywood mogul, are the latest in a series of high-profile sexual harassment and assault cases in the workplace. A variety of businesses have reported rising caution on relationships between the sexes.

This results in women's career opportunities being limited as male executives are more likely to interact with other men in the office, employment experts suggest.

Kim Elsesser, author and a scholar at the centre for the study of women at University of California, Los Angeles,

said that the spate of harassment allegations — from Fox News to Uber — had brought the issue to the forefront of people's attention. "My research found that men were nervous when they interact with women," she said. "They are afraid that friendliness will be misinterpreted. If they are going for drinks, it's easier to take a male colleague.

"We need to be re-educated on how to interact with the opposite sex in the workplace. Companies spend a lot of time telling people what not to do but it's important to teach how to socialise. It is discriminatory to exclude women from this aspect of worklife."

A third of women in Britain have been subjected to unwelcome jokes or sexual comments, according to research by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, the professional body for human resources. The same study

found that 23 per cent of women had experienced unwanted touches and 12 per cent endured sexual contact or attempts to kiss them at work.

Male executives told *The Times* that they would be uneasy spending time with female colleagues outside work. Some were even reluctant to meet one-to-one during office hours.

"My attitude towards office relationships has completely changed in the past few years," a 53-year-old senior banker in London said. "It is not like I was inappropriate before but I can't think of a situation where I would now be alone with a female colleague.

"I socialise with younger male employees often through sports but I'm not sure what the equivalent would be with women. There has been a shift in the industry certainly."

Management professionals have called for greater training to unpick

these grey areas. Sarah Nolte, a human resources partner at Apco, the communications company, said: "Basic social skills — the nuances of what is appropriate and what isn't — are not emphasised enough in professional training.

"I have led interview skills training where managers know they can't ask a woman if she plans on having children but beyond that they are very unsure of what is legal to ask in today's world."

The founder of a Manchester design agency said that in the current climate it would be "absurd to take a single girl from the office out for lunch".

The 48-year-old man, who spoke anonymously because his company is in legal dispute with a former member of staff, said: "I am very conscious of rogue employees. Any conversation about career progress that I have with staff happens in the office. I draw the line at having chaperones in every

meeting, you have to keep it natural. But I wouldn't take a woman for lunch. My main concern would be misinterpretation from others. People gossip.

"I definitely check myself in terms of compliments now. I'd be hesitant to comment on someone's clothing in case it caused offence."

Young women are also missing out in academic circles. A professor at Warwick university said that male staff had received email instructions to keep their office doors open when meeting female colleagues.

Another professor at a London university said he was reluctant to meet female students after 6pm. "I wouldn't feel comfortable asking my female students to join me for dinner or drinks in the same way I would a man," the 36-year-old academic said. "I am more likely to make career introductions for my male students."

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