



**Shauna Rae**  
**THE BROAD PERSPECTIVE**

A look at the work environment ... with a female lens

# TAKING A LOOK AT SEXUAL HARASSMENT

FIRST, IT WAS #MeToo, the social media hashtag that led women to admit; they too had faced sexual harassment. More recently, during the Golden Globe Awards, Oprah Winfrey’s rousing speech, mentioning both #MeToo and a campaign called #TimesUp, which included a boycott of black attire during the Golden Globes. The aim was to draw attention to rampant sexual harassment in the movie and television industry.

Here in Canada, the numbers grow of those accused of sexual misconduct and inappropriate behaviour, even in our backyard.



Sarah Low



Najwa Zebian

What exactly constitutes sexual harassment?



“The Ontario Human Rights Code defines harassment as “engaging in a course of vexatious comment or conduct that is known or ought to be known to be unwelcome.” One single incident can also be significant enough to constitute sexual harassment. It is any type of conduct that denigrates a person’s sexuality. It happens person-to-person, and also, at increasing rates via technology, sometimes anonymously.”

~ Sarah Low, Senior Associate Labour and Employment Law, McKenzie Lake Lawyers LLP

Why do you think it’s still so challenging for women to come forward?



“I believe the primary reason that it is so

hard for young women to come forward is a mixture of the fear of not being believed and the fear of retaliation. They are risking many things; their job, their credibility, their reputation, their mental health and wellbeing, etc. When you’re starting out in an organization and trying to prove yourself, you don’t want to disturb any waters.”

~ Najwa Zebian, Lebanese Canadian author, poet, speaker and educator



“There is a lot of fear. Often people report harassment and nothing is done. Or they face reprisal. An investigation can add to the trauma and humiliation of the event(s). Even if someone is “successful” in reporting or taking action, they can be “blackballed” in the workplace or the marketplace. It can destroy your professional network. At the end of the day, people need their paycheque.”

~ Sarah Low

Do we all have a responsibility?



“People need to speak up in the moment and/or report if they have witnessed sexual harassment. Standing up for others is an important part of changing a work culture. It’s probably the most important part. It lets the victim know that they are supported and they are more likely to report and recover from the incident(s). When people speak up, others around them do. There are strength in numbers.”

~ Sarah Low

Are we making progress?



“I think we have definitely come a long way, with our legislation and in society generally. People (and not just men) are now facing discipline, public shame, or losing jobs in the wake of the rising number of complaints. Professions (and earnings) are becoming increasingly less segregated

by gender, but this has been a slow change.”

~ Sarah Low



“On an international level, at the level of celebrity, we are making progress. At a local level, it is my sense that we are making progress at a much slower pace, but we are making progress.”

~ Najwa Zebian

What would you say to a woman that has experienced harassment and is weighing the

pros and cons of coming forward? “

“That’s a difficult question. I think a victim needs to ask themselves what they are hoping to change, or gain. Some women want to change the culture of an organization. Others want the offender to be punished or fired. It’s rare that I see either of these goals accomplished. Sometimes there is financial compensation. For some, disclosure can be an important part of the healing and recovery process. Usually once a victim has filed a complaint or taken action, they leave the organization. There can be a lot at stake and everyone’s circumstances are different. I am inclined to encourage employees to come forward, but there is certainly no shame in choosing not to.”

~ Sarah Low



“Remember that you have a voice. Let it roar. You know the truth of what you lived. No one has the right to take that away from you. They might blame and shame you. They might tell you not to talk about it. They might minimize your experience and tell you that it wasn’t that bad. They might tell you to get over it. But the most powerful thing that you carry is the truth. Use that power. You have an army of courageous women and men who will stand with you. I stand with you.”

~ Najwa Zebian

We stand together.