

Unsafe and Underpaid

How Sexual Harassment and Unfair Pay Hold Women Back

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Despite renewed attention in the media and among policy makers to gender and racial inequities, the United States still faces a long road ahead when it comes to closing the gender pay gap and ridding workplaces of sexual harassment. On average, women make only [82 cents](#) on the dollar compared to men, with women of color faring even worse, and the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission reports that up to [85 percent](#) of women experience sexual harassment over the course of their career.

Though related, these two issues, pay inequity and sexual harassment, are often represented as independent symptoms of a sexist culture, rather than intertwined and iterative co-conspirators. In a new TIME'S UP Foundation report, *Unsafe and Underpaid: How Sexual Harassment and Unfair Pay Hold Women Back*, author Andrea Flynn challenges this notion. Instead, she highlights **how sexual harassment and pay inequity are mutually reinforcing dynamics, working in tandem to prevent women from reaching their full potential at work and in society more broadly.**

To illustrate the ties between sexual harassment and pay inequity, Flynn investigates these interlocking trends within cultural norms, public policy, and the private sector. She illustrates how embedded social norms, codified laws, and common employer practices have left unequal pay and sexual harassment unchecked and have undermined women's safety and economic security. Ultimately, it is the lack of power in the workplace that drives both of these unjust outcomes:

- ▶ **Culture.** Historical norms that devalue women's work continue to shape women's employment today. These norms have been cemented in our labor practices and laws, channeling women into unsafe jobs where they face sexual harassment and into undercompensated sectors of the economy. The undervaluation of women's labor, most notably caregiving, can be traced directly to the coerced labor of enslaved Black women.

- ▶ **Public Policy.** The United States lacks essential laws and policies to ensure equal pay, including support for workers with child care responsibilities, as well as sufficient labor policies to protect workers. The lack of these policies has diminished women's ability to advocate for equity and safety — and carve outs for domestic and agriculture workers mean that many Black and Latinx women never had supports to begin with. These policies (or lack thereof) reinforce gendered and racialized norms and make it more likely that women are forced to take time away from work and lose income and career advancement opportunities. These laws also make it harder to speak out against workplace issues, including sexual harassment.
- ▶ **Workplace Policy.** From gender discrimination in hiring and promotion to nondisclosure and forced arbitration agreements that actively protect perpetrators of harassment, private sector practices both drive and derive from culture and public policy. These policies and practices silence victims and fuel the pay gap by channeling women, and in particular Black and Latinx women, into low-wage jobs or precarious positions that offer few benefits or economic security.

The paper demonstrates how those policies and practices create conditions and outcomes that reinforce harmful gender norms, fueling a vicious cycle. After all, pay inequity and sexual harassment are not just problems in and of themselves — they are symptoms of long-broken cultural, legal, and employment systems, which we must rebuild to ensure that women have fair, safe, and dignified work.

Today, COVID-19 has only exacerbated these entrenched inequities by limiting women's ability to find alternate employment when facing unsafe workplaces and heightening trade-offs between economic security and workplace safety. We must respond to this moment by addressing the underlying problems, and putting in place more inclusive policies that place the needs of historically marginalized women — specifically low-paid women and women of color — front and center.

Transformative change for women workers is not only necessary and just, but also smart. If women could be safer, more secure, and more prosperous, so too could our nation.

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