

Police face new battles War waged against sexual harassment

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

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"I think the women have a hard time," she said, "especially the younger women. Sexual harassment is more subtle these days. They were not realizing {that} what was happening to them was, in effect, discrimination and harassment."

FULL TEXT

In the not-too-distant past, county police Lt. Jim Fahrman felt free to joke around with his squad -- even going so far as once telling a female officer she could get a new shirt only if her chest was a size 40.

The 16-year veteran made the crack in the days before two high-ranking department officials were investigated on charges of sexual harassment. Lieutenant Fahrman said he was referring to the size shirts he had available.

"She laughed," Lieutenant Fahrman said of the female officer. "But those are the kind of things guys are afraid to say because of the current situation here."

Since February, two captains have been investigated administratively for sexual harassment, while two sergeants have been investigated on similar allegations. The investigation against Capt. Don F. Ward, former head of the Northern District, included an allegation of rape.

The 25-year department veteran retired before he could formally be charged with the allegations made against him by four women. He was never charged criminally.

Shortly after those four came forward, two other women told the department's Internal Affairs Unit that Capt. Richard Smith, head of the Criminal Investigation Division, sexually harassed them. He was charged by the department in April. An administrative hearing is scheduled next month.

In May, Southern District Sgt. George Halpin was charged with conduct unbecoming an officer after he allegedly described a female officer as "good in bed" in front of his squad. He waived his right to a hearing and was given a day off without pay as punishment.

Another sergeant is under investigation for allegedly harassing a female officer -- who he was convicted of harassing eight years ago, after she shunned his romantic overtures. He was suspended after being found guilty of improper performance of duty.

These investigations have prompted Lieutenant Fahrman and other officers to question their limits with female co-workers.

"Where is the line where it becomes offensive?" he asked. "Where is the line for sexual harassment?"

It is not a term easily defined. County policy says sexual harassment can be anything from verbal abuse to "creating a hostile working environment."

Although sexual harassment may have been largely ignored in the past, "Society is gradually changing, and our department will reflect that," Chief Robert Russell said.

Just how -- or how far -- it will change is the big question.

"In the work setting, teasing and joking are included in a positive work environment," said Internal Affairs investigator Sgt. Bonnie Welsh. "It contributes to productivity, and therefore there is a gray line."

To distinguish between innocent teasing and harassment, two factors are the perceived motive and the demeanor of the speaker, Sergeant Welsh says. If the employee doesn't feel that the behavior was done either spitefully or maliciously, the individual will not feel harassed.

"Some women don't like anything even said to them. But I'm not one of those," said Officer Beth Pusloskie, 23. "When it comes to touching, I would put a stop to that."

A colleague, Officer Jeff Little, agreed.

"You could use anything as sexual harassment. It's different for each woman," Officer Little said. He and Officer Pusloskie are friends, and because of that relationship, she knows he is just kidding around. "There are some women I would not go as far with, he said.

Sergeant Welsh said sexual harassment goes beyond "normal horseplay," and like rape, is motivated by power and degradation.

Although most officers were willing to share their opinions about sexual harassment, many were afraid to talk about problems in the department, fearing reprisals.

Most said they have never felt like they were sexually harassed. But even if they were, some said, it would be difficult to come forward.

"They can make your life miserable, ruin your career," one female officer said.

While offensive comments sometimes are directed toward her, another said, they are not enough to go "screaming sexual harassment.

"If you did that, you wouldn't have any friends out there," the officer said, noting she needs to depend on fellow officers to back her up on calls.

Another officer who wished to remain anonymous acknowledged she has had comments made to her, but said she "throws them back.

"Anybody who works here has got to expect that," she said. "If a man doesn't notice a woman, you have got to wonder what is wrong with him. You can't expect men to be squeaky clean all the time."

She is not alone in that opinion.

"When I came on the department, I knew that it was mostly men," said one female officer. "You just have to expect there are going to be offensive things said, and you have to go with the flow."

"In this job, you learn to accept it," another said. "Men are going to be men, and sometimes they forget that we are women. We are the ones who took this job."

Most officers, male and female, agreed that a woman who thinks she has a problem shouldn't keep it to herself.

"If the woman gave notice to the person that she did not like what he said and he continued, then she has a complaint," Lieutenant Fahrman said.

Communication, Sergeant Welsh agreed, is the key.

"If the sender does not know the behavior is sexual harassment, then how is he going to change that behavior?" she asked, adding that a man should also use "common sense" to tell if what he is saying is making the woman uncomfortable.

While harassment complaints in the department came to light on the heels of the Clarence Thomas Supreme Court confirmation hearings, Sergeant Welsh and others said the timing was only coincidental.

The estranged husband of a civilian employee started the controversy here, calling Internal Affairs in February and telling investigators that a captain had raped his wife six years ago.

When investigators interviewed the woman, they were led to other alleged victims, Sergeant Welsh said. After reading accounts of the Ward case in the newspaper, two other women made the complaints against Captain Smith.

Gauging just how prevalent sexual harassment is in the department is not easy. Official complaints are rare, and accurate records not always available.

In the last five years, only one sexual harassment complaint against the department has been filed with the county Human Relations Commission -- by a civilian employee in 1991. Based on that complaint, a male civilian employee was reprimanded, said Louise Hayman, spokeswoman for the county executive.

In 1990, a former policewoman filed a sexual harassment complaint with the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. The investigation was dropped when the woman accepted another county job.

Although statistics on harassment complaints filed with the EEOC are not public information, officials there said, that complaint was made public when the woman called area newspapers.

The departments' Internal Affairs Unit investigated three sexual harassment complaints from 1988 to 1991, Sergeant Welsh said. All the defendants were found guilty and punished.

No complaints were filed between 1985 and 1987, department statistics show, and only one from 1962 -- when women first joined the force -- to 1984.

The department has not turned a deaf ear to the problem. The ranks of sergeant and above have received sexual harassment training as recently as 1989, while recruits are exposed to it while at the academy, as part of a course on human relations. Chief Russell said he will be distributing a new training module within a few weeks for all employees to read.

Shortly after Republican Robert Neall was elected county executive in 1990, his transition team looked into sexual discrimination and harassment in the police and fire departments. Paula J. Peters, an Annapolis attorney, randomly chose 12 women from the department and interviewed them in her office. She also interviewed other minority officers.

She said none of the female officers offered specific instances of sexual harassment, but there were complaints of unfair job placement and "wisecracks." If two officers were dating, Ms. Peters was told, the gossip was usually negative about the female officer and not the male.

The toughest place for women seemed to be the street.

"When women were moved inside, it seemed to be OK," Ms. Peters said.

"I think the women have a hard time," she said, "especially the younger women. Sexual harassment is more subtle these days. They were not realizing {that} what was happening to them was, in effect, discrimination and harassment."

While Ms. Peters said she made no formal recommendations, she believes work needs to be done to change outdated attitudes about women and minorities.

"With the old chief {George Wellham}, I don't think that was a priority," she said. "Chief Russell was very cooperative and gave officers permission to come to my office. And that sends an important message down to the department.

"We can't change what people think, but we can change behaviors -- and that is all we can really ask for."

To bolster harassment training instituted at the police academy in 1989, Sergeant Welsh and Capt. Mary Williams have started a mentor program for new female officers.

"It's a way to provide new officers with support," Sergeant Welsh said.

Illustration

PHOTO 1 PHOTO 2; Caption: PAULA PETERS "Sexual harassment more subtle now." BONNIE WELSH "With teasing, there is a gray line."

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