NBA 2019: Focus on sexual harassment in the workplace

Date: 2019-08-24

Source: https://guardian.ng/guardian-woman/nba-2019-focus-on-sexual-harassment-in-the-workplace/

Sexual harassment is increasingly gaining prominence in global and national discourse nowadays. This may not be unconnected to the widening dissemination of information through the social media platforms, most especially, the twitter and Facebook. Through these platforms, the world has become a global village, where happenings in any part of the globe are shared across the “four corners” of the globe in a matter of seconds.  
  
We are besieged every day with stories of allegations from victims of sexual abuses and convictions of felons who committed sexual offenses from all around the world, with some of these offenses having been committed decades earlier. So, we hear of priests, actors, musicians and so on being convicted of pedophilia, producers being convicted of sexual quid pro quo and many other forms of sexual abuse against upcoming artistes both in the movie and music industries.  
  
Despite the fact that sexual offences know no boundaries, the issue of sexual harassment in the office, especially the nine-to-five establishments, is heavily under-reported and under-discussed, hence mostly under-tackled. While there could be a dearth of information on the prevalence of the issue in Nigeria, studies conducted in some other countries show that at least one-in-four women (25 per cent) and one-in-10 men (10 percent) are victims of sexual harassment cum abuse in workplaces.  
  
[ad]  
  
This is one reason to look forward to the 59th Annual General Conference of the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA), scheduled to hold in Lagos, from August 23 to 29, 2019. The organisers of the conference have put sexual harassment in the Legal/Justice community on the front burner for discussion by the lawyers at the summit.  
  
Sexual harassment in the workplace could be defined as any type of unwanted sexual advances, comments, actions, jokes, or physical touch that occurs in one’s place of work. It could also include coercion or requests for sexual favours in exchange for employment or promotion opportunities or any other sexually explicit verbal or visual actions, such as being exposed to pornographic materials.  
  
The inclusion of this issue in the Conference’s agenda is, in part, an admission by the organisers of the existence, if not a large prevalence of sexual harassment in their field of practice which includes the Bar, Bench, Police and other agencies and bodies that play a role in the delivery of justice in the country.  
  
For the uninitiated, this seems unimaginable as it is generally believed that these professionals, a recourse group for the victims of sexual harassment/assault who wish to seek redress in the law courts, not only know their rights and how to pursue them, but could also easily fight for themselves. These people seem not to understand that the rich also cry, that the pillar of support also needs support.  
  
The issue of sexual harassment has existed in legal workspace for as long as it has been in other sectors and professional spaces. As with the larger society, a greater percentage of victims are the younger legal practitioners, who bear the greater burden of this ill practice. What makes the issue more terrible in the justice system is that the perpetrators of this injustice are those who are versed in the laws of the land. They not only have the clout to “silence” their victims but also know all the loopholes there could be in the law books that they could take advantage of to avoid persecution.  
  
The inclusion of the issue on the agenda of this august gathering is timely for several reasons. It would serve as a wake-up call to the perpetrators of this inglorious act to retrace their steps to avoid the ugly consequences that may befall them if they continue in their immoral behaviour. It would also embolden the victims of sexual harassment/assault to square up with their harassers, who are either their supervisors or higher-ranking employees, and fight for their rights.  
  
The larger society would also benefit from the discussion as it will bring to the public space the harmful effects of the issue both to the individual psychologically and physically, as well as to the business and will also chart a course on how the other victims could cope with sexual abuses.  
  
While psychologists list anxiety attacks, insomnia, loss of self-esteem, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, or thoughts of suicide as some of the psychological effects of sexual harassment, doctors list high blood pressure, headaches, gastrointestinal disorders, sexual dysfunctions, eating disorders, including weight loss or weight gain as effects of sexual harassment.  
  
Sexual harassment in the workplace, which is a form of employment discrimination, also has some negative effects on the establishment and the workers. These effects include low personnel morale, decreased performance, increased personnel turnover and reduced profitability etc.  
  
As legal practitioners gather to discuss this ugly reality in the industry, one could only hope that the outcome would greatly reduce the prevalence, if not completely eliminate the practice of sexual harassment in the legal community as well as set a standard that other establishments/industries could deploy to address the hydra-headed monster that robs employees of their job satisfaction in their chosen careers.  
  
[ad unit=2]