

Is sexual harassment different from the perspective of black women?

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Sexual harassment has been back in the news with reports of a lawsuit against U.S. Olympics women's basketball coach, [Geno Auriemma](#).

Kelley Hardwick, an African-American NBA security official, [claims Auriemma had her removed from an assignment](#) to the 2012 London Games in retaliation, after she spurned his advances. In addition, she alleges she was paid less than her male counterparts and was "slammed hard" against the league's "glass ceiling."

In response, Auriemma called the claims "beyond false" and said he would defend himself "to the fullest." The employment discrimination lawsuit, filed June 11 in state Supreme Court in Manhattan, names Auriemma, the NBA and USA Basketball as defendants.

Whatever the outcome of this case, it is a stark reminder that sexual misconduct in the workplace is still alive and kicking, even at the highest levels.

In fact, according to the National Council for Research on Women, at least half of all women will experience sexual harassment at some point in their lives.

"Sexual harassment is still pervasive, frequent and harmful," high-profile Los Angeles attorney, [Gloria Allred](#), told theGrio.

However, according to clinical psychologist, [Nicole T. Buchanan](#), of Michigan State University, experts who investigate harassment have been disturbingly silent about issues facing women of color.

For African-American women, sexual harassment is rarely, if ever, about sex or sexism alone; it is also about race, says Buchanan. "Racialized sexual harassment is the way women of color are uniquely harassed in ways that combine race and gender."

Advice columnist Deborah Cooper, who says she herself has experienced sexual harassment in corporate America, agrees that gender and ethnicity play a role in how different women are treated, or mistreated, in the workplace. "White employees tend to feel superior", co-workers are "less respectful towards black women," and there is the perception that "sistas are of less value," says Cooper.

For Buchanan, sexual harassment is inextricably intertwined with racist attitudes. "Sometimes drawing on stereotypes of black women, for example, the assumption that African-American women are hyper-sexual," says Buchanan.

Buchanan states that black women are more vulnerable in the workplace, not only because of cultural norms, but economic inequality and organizational power. "Women of color tend to have less power and people with less power tend to be harassed or victimized."

"Perpetrators target people who are vulnerable, less credible or less likely to resist what's happening," says University of Washington psychology professor, Dr. Carolyn M. West. "Sexual harassment isn't just about sex," says Buchanan. "It is about power, control and dominance. It's a way to put people in their place."

Black women, for instance, may remain silent when work colleagues cross the line because of their more precarious position in the job market, which may make them feel they have too much to lose by speaking out.

The race of the perpetrator is an underlying factor, says Dr. West. She says black women have a history of victimization from slavery to their role as domestic servants and even as professionals in corporate America. However, if the harasser is a black man an African-American woman may stay silent to protect him.

Cooper says African American women may also be less likely to report harassment because of a cultural resistance to law enforcement. "They don't want outsiders getting into their business."

Dr. West admits she was a victim of sexual harassment as a graduate student at the University of Missouri-St Louis in the late 1980s. After enduring three years of systematic harassment at the hands of her supervisor, West finally found the courage to go public and take legal action.

She says she waited so long before coming forward because she was afraid her supervisor and his powerful colleagues "would end her career before it begun by forcing her out of my doctoral program." West adds, "I felt haunted by the oversexed, promiscuous black Jezebel image that is common in American culture."

In addition, "I knew I wasn't his only victim. Still, I feared that my complaints wouldn't be viewed as credible," says West, who is also author of the award-winning book, *Violence in the Lives of Black Women: Battered, Black and Blue*.

"Fear is a weapon that keeps most women from standing up for their rights," says Allred. They are fearful of losing their job, worried about retaliation from employers, the emotional cost and financial implications of legal fees, says Allred.

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