

This piece was written for a local newspaper, *The Olympian* while serving as a member of the Diversity Panel from 2007 through 2008.

## **Sexism tolerated in the workplace can be very costly**

By David Whitfield | The Olympian's Diversity Panel • Published April 13, 2007

I support Allan Johnson in his book "Privilege, Power, and Difference," where he says, "The challenge we face is to change patterns of exclusion, rejection, privilege, harassment, discrimination, and violence that are everywhere in this society and have existed for hundreds (or, in the case of gender thousands) of years."

In the case of gender, he's referring to sexism.

In my experience and travels, sexism respects neither race, nor color, nor culture, and more recently, age. Sexism is enabled by women and men by way of speech, dress, attitudes, expectations and goals.

We start sexism in the family, carrying our patterns of behavior into the workplace, adversely affecting human relations, morale and performance. We perpetuate it in the workplace by making economic decisions that affect working women: less pay, fewer promotions, and certain jobs relegated to women because they are women, though there are exceptions to this.

We also perpetuate it by our language.

Often the language we use toward women in the workplace is despicable. Here's a real life example:

A male employer sits in a female employee's chair. When she returns, he says to her, "Do I have to get up before you sit down?"

How is the employee supposed to respond to her boss? And what if she was your significant other, partner, sister or daughter?

In this instance, the sexism was further perpetuated by those who witness this interaction and remained silent. They were complicit in the employer's behavior toward the employee. And if he continues his behavior, unchecked, it can lead to more serious issues, especially if he makes economic decisions that adversely affect his female employee's well-being.

Sexism leads to legal action because in a male-dominated, male-centered workplace it is tolerated. In a sexism study by T. H. Shore, women were rated

higher than men on their interpersonal skills, job performance and intellectual ability. However, it was shown that women were no more likely to receive higher pay and senior management positions than men - passive oppression at its finest.

Sexism can be financially devastating in the workplace, especially when Title VII of the Civil Rights Act comes rapping on your door.

Here are a few monetary examples of how the courts are righting the wrongs:

In a recent case, six women are suing one of the world's biggest investment banks for \$1.4 billion for sexism. In 2004, Morgan Stanley paid \$54 million. Publix Super-Markets out of Florida was successfully sued for \$63.5 million. Depending on one's perspective, these are not small potatoes.

What about your workplace? Could it survive these types of legal actions?

As leaders, in our home, community and workplace, we have both a challenge and an obligation to change these patterns.

Leaders should ask themselves: How do I participate in feeding these patterns? What actions am I willing to take to make an internal shift to have a significant and positive effect on human relations, especially in my workplace?

