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Fifty-four Percent Report Experiencing Sexual Harassment at Work in Professional Dimensions Survey

MILWAUKEE, April 26, 2018—Milwaukee-based Professional Dimensions, a network of more than 350 local women leaders, launched a three-part program series on sexual harassment in the workplace based on the findings of their recent survey.

Earlier this year, 113 women (32% of total membership) shared their personal experiences on the job. Professional Dimensions partnered with TEMPO Milwaukee to distribute the same survey questions it created in 2017 to further amplify the voices of women locally and add to the diversity of the data set.

Professional Dimensions membership body spans four generations of women, from more than 300 companies with workforces ranging from a few employees to over 10,000. Members' career levels range from young professionals to seasoned executives and its racial make-up includes Asian American, Native American, African American, Caucasian, Hispanic and Latina women.

Fifty-four percent reported experiencing sexual harassment at work as defined by the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Women experienced sexual harassment at every level of their careers, but most prominently (49%) at the entry level, when there is often a greater imbalance of power. Furthermore, 56% have witnessed sexual harassment occur at their places of work.

Participants were also asked if they thought the current conversations and media coverage would have an impact. Seventy percent expected a positive impact on workplaces, but the other 30% were either unsure, believed it would have no impact at all or a negative one. Women even reported witnessing the dismissal or denial of the problem by company leadership.

The survey results also suggest that many local employers have not taken action. Fifty-one percent of respondents work for an employer with a formal reporting process in place and 41% felt their employer had proactively addressed the issue. It is worth noting that 18% and 20%, respectively, answered "Not Applicable" to these two questions. Professional Dimensions believes this is likely due to the number of members that work as consultants or for small business with only a few employees.

Even for those who have reporting mechanisms in place, many expressed a lack of confidence or clarity in reporting to their employers. One woman wrote, "I'd NEVER use it. Only a neophyte would think you could report this and not have it affect your career."

The survey dug deeper into women's opinions on reporting incidents and found that 82% would report it if they were blatantly sexually harassed. Still, 18% say they are unsure or would not report it.

And what if it is not so blatant? Forty-six of the women surveyed shared their personal stories, detailing instances at work that ranged from inappropriate staring to sexual assault. One story read, "There is a senior man on our floor who constantly looks at women's breasts, makes slightly inappropriate comments and stands way too close."

Professional Dimensions Director, Johannah Karstedt St. John, expressed concerns around commonly offered advice to women and employers, which include confronting a harasser directly, reporting the incident and putting policies in place. Karstedt St. John said, “While these are all critically important actions that we need to take seriously, the truth is they are often much easier said than done. Historically, they have not led to change consistently enough for many women to believe they are worth the risk. The cultural power structures that foster sexual harassment are the same ones that make us think twice about speaking up.”

Survey participants were asked to share advice they would give to a colleague experiencing sexual harassment and several responses echoed these concerns. One woman wrote, “I would certainly encourage her to report it to HR, but I would counsel her that she should be prepared to move on as companies will engage in backlash towards those employees who report harassment issues.”

In other answers to that same survey question, Professional Dimensions leadership saw an unexpected but encouraging pattern of advice emerge about the power of relationships.

Karen Vernal summarized this advice as: “Build strong professional relationships, so you can work through difficult situations with someone you trust.” Vernal further expounded, “This is what Professional Dimensions members do every day. We use our power to help each other and advance our community. We are committed to using our power to help eliminate sexual harassment in the workplace.”

“We are asking ourselves ‘what do we do next?’ The current recommendations to address this issue are not enough. We don’t have clear answers. Instead, we are inviting our members and the community to engage in the conversation in order to learn what might, in fact, be ‘the what next?’ Our program series will both educate and invite our collective wisdom in response to this cultural, destructive issue.”

Professional Dimensions is holding a three-part program series on sexual harassment in the workplace. At each session, the issue will be presented through a new lens. This will include personal storytelling, a historical recap on the advancement of women, small group analysis of real situations, and empowering resources to spur action. The first program took place on April 26 and the two remaining programs are on May 9 and May 22. All are open to the public. Details can be found on Professional Dimensions website.

About Professional Dimensions

Founded in 1978, Professional Dimensions is a membership organization of more than 350 inclusive women leaders who use their collective power to help each other and advance the community. Guided by four tenets, Leadership, Diversity, Community and Networking, Professional Dimensions cultivates relationships between women of all backgrounds, ages, industries and experience levels.

www.professionaldimensions.org

About the Series: Uncovering Sexual Harassment

- Thursday, April 26, 2018, 5:30 to 7:30 PM
Wisconsin Club, 900 W Wisconsin Ave, Milwaukee, WI 53233

Uncovering Our History – Attorney Rebeca Lopez of Godfrey & Kahn will walk us through a brief history behind the advancement of women and long-time Professional Dimensions leader Margaret Henningsen will share her personal experiences. Additionally, Professional Dimensions Director Johannah Karstedt St. John will review the results of a recent member survey on sexual harassment in the work place.

- Wednesday, May 9, 2018, 11:30 AM to 1:30 PM
Wisconsin Club, 900 W Wisconsin Ave, Milwaukee, WI 53233

Scenarios of Truth, Progressive Lunch – Facilitated by Professional Dimensions members Deidre Garrett of MRA and Jilly Gokalgandhi of Rockwell Automation, this program will confront the issue of sexual harassment head-on through interactive exercises and honest conversation.

Progressive Lunches and Dinners are signature programs of Professional Dimensions. At these interactive events, group discussions are held at each table, and attendees change tables with each course.

- Tuesday, May 22, 2018, 5:30 to 7:30 PM
Wisconsin Club, 900 W Wisconsin Ave, Milwaukee, WI 53233

Activation and Empowerment – Facilitated by Casey Tate Mahoney of Mercer, we will arm members with solutions. Casey will present the findings of Mercer's study *When Women Thrive, Business Thrive*, which concludes that data and analysis support the value of gender inclusion strategies and that success requires courageous leadership and a holistic approach. We will empower members with language and strategies to address this in their own workplaces as individuals, managers, executives and business owners.

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