Labor & Public Employees Committee
Public Testimony of the CT Women’s Education and Legal Fund (CWEALF)
HB 5271: An Act Increasing Sexual Harassment Prevention Training
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The Connecticut Women’s Education and Legal Fund (CWEALF) is a statewide nonprofit that advocates for and empowers women and girls in Connecticut, especially those who are underserved or marginalized. For forty-five years, CWEALF has advocated for policies that advance the economic security of women across our state and promote gender equity in the workplace.

Through CWEALF’s Legal Education Program, we educate Connecticut residents, especially low-income women, about their rights and connect them to legal resources and attorneys. We also provide sexual harassment prevention trainings to companies, nonprofit organizations, and educational institutions, to create a safe and respectful work culture.

While the recent high-profile allegations of sexual harassment can be shocking, the pervasive nature of sexual harassment across every industry is not surprising. Both nationally and in our own Connecticut workforce, sexual harassment remains a significant problem. According to a recent report from Stop Street Harassment, 81% of women and 43% of men reported experiencing some form of sexual harassment and/or assault. The report also found that 38% of women reported sexual harassment at their workplace.

Sexual harassment also persists here at the State Capitol and Legislative Office Building. An anonymous survey conducted by the Office of Legislative Management in 2018 found that at least 22% of employees, legislators, and lobbyists experienced some type of sexual harassment at the State Capitol or Legislative Office Building. The report also showed that some survey respondents experienced quid pro quo sexual harassment where someone in authority offered job related benefits in exchange for sexual favors.¹

Sexual harassment in the workplace threatens workers’ economic survival. It frequently leads to job loss, lost wages, legal fees, detachment from the workforce, and less income for families. More than ¼ of sexual harassment charges originate in industries with large numbers of service-sector and low-wage workers, who are predominantly women of color.

Moreover, sexual harassment and assault is so common for women that most differences by race are statistically insignificant. One exception, however, is disability status: 40% of women with disabilities reported experiencing sexual harassment compared to 23% of women without disabilities.

¹ Refer to the original source for more details.
Workplace harassment also often affects individuals’ physical and emotional wellbeing. According to the International Journal of Public Health, non-physical sexual harassment (such as comments or jokes) is associated with a psychological impact on the targets - including anxiety, depression, negative body image, and lowered self-esteem. It can also result in physical effects, such as headaches, sleep disorders, weight loss or gain, and nausea.

CWEALF supports H.B. 5271 to increase sexual harassment prevention training for certain entities. Currently, Connecticut law requires employers with 50 or more employees to provide two hours of training to supervisory employees within six months of their hire. Training, however, is only required to occur once and leaves out small employers who are not immune to sexual harassment.

As H.B. 5271 is drafted, CWEALF recommends language to require employers with three or more employees to provide at least two hours of training on sexual harassment to all employees within six months of employment. Training must include bystander intervention skills and discussions regarding workplace civility, as well as acceptable and expected behavior in the workplace. CWEALF also recommends legislation require employers with three or more employees to provide new employees information about sexual harassment and available remedies within their first three months of employment.

In addition, CWEALF recommends H.B. 5271 increase the time limit to file an employment discrimination or sexual harassment claim with the Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities from 180 days to 3 years.

Victims are often reluctant to come forward after an assault or harassment. Underreporting of sexual harassment and assault in the workplace stems from fear of retaliation from employers or colleagues: a 2016 study from the EEOC found that 75% of employees who spoke out against workplace mistreatment faced some sort of retaliation. Victims also often fear that they won’t be believed or will be subject to professional punishment, including termination. The current 180 day limit to file a complaint limits a victim’s ability to process the events that have occurred and decide the best way to take action.

CWEALF urges the Committee to support House Bill No. 5271 to further prevent sexual harassment in the workplace, and support women’s economic security.

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