Montreal Gazette (Montreal, Quebec), as provided by Southam Electronic Publishing, May 9, 1996, p. D2

Sexual harassment, Japanese-style: While incidents are common, complaints are rare

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Section: Business
Edition: Final
Dateline: TOKYO

Topics:
sexual harassment
women
working conditions
Japan

Estimated printed pages: 4

Article Text:

Kiyomi Kikuchi, a new saleswoman for Central Finance, was visiting clients with a male deputy branch manager, when the man suddenly turned their car into the parking lot of a "love hotel," an establishment, common in Japan, that rents rooms to couples by the hour.

"I said, 'You must be joking,'" Kikuchi recalled. Her strong protests got the man to turn back that day, but his advances continued for months. The branch manager ignored her complaints, she said, but finally realized they were true and gave her a new sales partner.

But not long after, the branch manager came to her again. "He said the deputy had been discredited," Kikuchi, 29, recalled last week. "And in order to restore his reputation, I had to help him" by becoming his partner again.

What happened to Kikuchi, experts said, is not unusual in Japan, where women play subservient roles in the workplace and where men openly read pornographic comic books on the subways.

In a survey two years ago by Tokyo's city government, 26.5 per cent of women workers reported having had some unpleasant sex-related experience on the job, mainly being told lewd jokes or being touched.

What is unusual is that Kikuchi, who quit her job, sued the Nagoya-based company and the deputy branch manager for sexual harassment. Lawyers for both denied the charges; the case is pending.

Unlike in the U.S., where sexual-harassment suits against a U.S. subsidiary of Mitsubishi Motors Corp. have captured headlines, few women in Japan even complain to their companies, perhaps because of a tradition in society of persevering through problems or because they feel that it would do no good. And in this generally nonlitigious society, only a handful of women file sex-harassment suits each year.

Hence sexual harassment has not pervaded the social consciousness of Japan. The term used here, "sekuhara," is derived from English, suggesting that Japan did not have much of concept of it before.

Companies in Japan think of it as a problem involving individual women, said Masaomi Kaneko, deputy director of the Tokyo labor economic bureau. "They do not consider it a moral issue or think about why it happens or of improving the work environment."

Plaintiffs in the case against Mitsubishi Motor Manufacturing of America think such attitudes might have contributed to tolerance of sexual harassment by the top Japanese executives at the factory in Normal, Ill., which is now being sued by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and by some current and former female employees. The workers who are actually accused of having scribbled lewd graffiti on walls, groped female co-workers or shown them pornographic photos are American, however.

Mitsubishi's managers say they do not tolerate sexual harassment and that the Japanese executives sent to the U.S. were trained in American values.

Certainly, Japanese companies have run into conflicts when they have tried to impose their traditional business practices on U.S. subsidiaries. There have been many suits accusing the Japanese companies of discriminating against women, minorities or Americans in general.

But executives of other Japanese companies said that, by now, any Japanese company setting up in the U.S. should be aware of these problems.

Experts said the cause of sexual harassment in Japan is that women have a secondary status in society. Behavior that would be considered politically incorrect in the U.S. is accepted here.

At computer trade shows, the latest components are demonstrated by legions of models in miniskirts. Late-night TV often features shapely young women in bikinis who engage in mud-wrestling or other mindless contests that seem designed mainly to make their tops fall off.

Entertaining clients and associates is an important part of doing business here, and it can involve women. Japanese executives talk business in "hostess bars," where women pour Scotch and water and flatter them with idle chatter.

One Japanese businessman, who has been stationed in New York and Asia, said it was not unusual to arrange prostitutes for a client or a visiting big shot from headquarters.

In Japan, clients might be taken to a "soapland," an establishment in which a naked woman bathes a male customer. In New York, the Japanese businessman belonged to a members-only club, 30 to 40 per cent of whose members were Japanese, that featured a sauna, swimming pool and prostitutes. "I would take my guests there and let them do as they liked," he said.

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Mitsubishi Motors trainees from America were taken to striptease bars when they visited Japan, and Japanese visiting Illinois were taken to parties involving prostitutes.

In Japanese companies, women often work as "office ladies," serving tea and doing clerical work. They usually are not eligible for promotions and are expected to retire after getting married.

With women often being considered "workplace flowers," perhaps it is not surprising that one bank a few years ago told women coming to its welcoming party for new employees to wear swimsuits.

Kyoko Ode, a secretary at a law firm, said her boss at a previous company had drawn pictures of an outfit he wanted her to wear - one containing transparent parts.

Men, in particular, work long hours in Japan, so often the chance for socializing is in after-hours drinking with co-workers or on company trips.

Yuko Yamada, who once worked for a small design firm, recalled one company trip at which everyone played a drinking game requiring them to chug alcohol or sing a song when they made a mistake.

After she made three consecutive mistakes, the company president, a grandfather in his 60s, chirped, "Those who make three mistakes in a row have to kiss me."

"The other people, mostly middle-aged women, started yelling I should kiss him," said Yamada, who was 18 at the time. "I couldn't really get away so I kissed the president on his cheek.

"Then he sat next to me and began to touch me all over," she recalled. "He started putting his hand inside my robe and proclaiming, 'Yamada is my girl.' I felt really nauseated."

Yamada, now 27 and an employee of a software firm, said the president's behavior continued after the trip.

"But I tolerated it because I was quite broke at the time and I couldn't quit my job."

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