

1-1-2018

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Recommended Citation

Rochelle Dornatt, *Thank You Harvey Weinstein*, 29 *Hastings Women's L.J.* 3 (2018).
Available at: <https://repository.uchastings.edu/hwlj/vol29/iss1/2>

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Thank You, Harvey Weinstein

*Rochelle Dornatt**

I worked on Capitol Hill for 35 years. During that time I saw and experienced various forms of sexual harassment and discrimination. Other female staffers I know had similar experiences. Yet none of us went public; we all worked through the issue however best we could in order to survive, advance, and ultimately triumph over our abusers and the system that protected them.

The mess now surrounding Harvey Weinstein actually gives me hope. I do not know exactly what the trigger was to make all those women come forward and confront their bully, but it is liberating to see it happen.

I say this because it is time for the system—attitudes, cultures, mindsets, whatever you want to call it—to change. Until recently, any woman who accused a man of harassment was usually looked at skeptically, like it was her fault. She was tainted with scandal, with trying to make a buck off the publicity, even with sleeping around to get ahead, when all along all she wanted to do was her job. That kind of fallout only conspired to keep women

* Ms. Dornatt is a 35-year veteran of politics and legislative work. She earned a Bachelor's degree in Political Science in 1977 (Marygrove College); a Master's degree in Legislative Affairs in 1981 (George Washington University); and a Certificate in the Senior Manager in Government Program in 1995 (Harvard University). In addition, Ms. Dornatt served as Majority Leader in a noted "Mock Congress" session hosted by the Library of Congress (1984) and participated in a staff exchange between the U.S. Congress and the German Bundestag (1997). In 2000 she completed a Fellowship with the Stennis Center for Public Service. In her government career, Ms. Dornatt has worked for the Executive Branch, Members of the House of Representatives, the U.S. Senate and the Democratic Leadership. Through 2016 Ms. Dornatt served as Chief of Staff to U.S. Rep. Sam Farr, a 12-term member of the House of Representatives from the Central Coast of California. Ms. Dornatt is best known on Capitol Hill for her detailed knowledge of the legislative process and the intricate political dynamics of Congress. Ms. Dornatt was a key player in the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ACA) and drafting campaign finance reform legislation. Moreover, Ms. Dornatt has regularly shaped legislation provision-by-provision. For the last 20+ years she has inserted language into the massive Department of Defense Appropriations bills directing that agency to provide services, monies and support to specific causes. She has extensive experience in BRAC policy and has been deeply involved in BRAC legislation since the '90's. Other bills – on marine science, land use policy, immigration reform, tax policy, and the environment – all have been enacted containing sections authored by Ms. Dornatt. In 2012 Ms. Dornatt was named "Outstanding Alumna" by her college because of her congressional work. Prior to her retirement in 2017, Ms. Dornatt was awarded the Creswell Congressional Staff Award by the Stennis Center. This award is presented to the congressional staff person who most exemplifies the ideal work ethic for Capitol Hill staffers.

quiet about what was happening to them.

On Capitol Hill the players are very powerful; working among them can be quite mesmerizing. These are people who possess significant public influence, wield vast amounts of money both personal and public, and exert control over political and policy outcomes. They also have an array of staff at their command.

Despite Equal Opportunity laws, Fair Labor Standards, and other similar laws that govern employment, staff on the Hill still “serve at the pleasure of the Member.” That is the overarching principle at play and hiring and personnel practices reflect it. The many, many layers of paper you sign when going through the Capitol Hill hiring process says this clearly. It means that your performance must please the congressman or senator and dismissal can be for reasons other than cause. Disagree with the Member about a policy stance? You’re outta there. Push back on office dress code policy? Say goodbye. Complain about discrimination? Um, your contribution to the workplace is no longer compatible with office goals. Sayonara.

For women, serving at the pleasure of the Member often meant being relegated to support staff roles rather than policy roles—and not complaining about it. It meant putting up with salaries that were less than men make because (as one Chief of Staff told me) “men are the breadwinners at home.” It meant dressing “nicely” and having to go to dinners with the Member and constituents or lobbyists where no policy was discussed, but a good time was had by all. Dinners where women were expected to provide a diversion from the day’s heavy policy business through light conversation and “harmless” flirtations. When those dinners happened to me I made sure to talk about newspaper articles and current events nonstop. It was boring, but effective.

I know of situations where Members had their female staff walk behind them while their male staffers did not. (It didn’t help that women were expected to dress in high heels. Running in stilettos on marble floors is not a recommended healthy pastime.) Then there was the situation where a Member refused to ride in a car with a woman so as to prevent anyone from thinking he was “involved” with her. And a situation where a Member of Congress regularly sidled up to a female staff on the floor of the House of Representatives and groped, grabbed and fondled her while she was trying to do her job monitoring the floor debate and votes.

The women who experienced these instances of dehumanization dealt with them one way or the other but almost always did so quietly. To make a fuss would be to jeopardize your job. Remember, these were powerful men. Their position automatically put them in a superior position that made them nearly immune to criticism. The women, on the other hand, were automatically suspect. On the Hill, you do not threaten the power structure; it’ll eat you up. Better to deal with issues like this quietly and move on.

Things are much better on the Hill these days. As more women rise in the ranks of Congress, they bring a fresh perspective and command a respect

—grudging or otherwise—from the very men who used to ogle the length (or tightness) of their skirts. That kind of cultural shift is still incomplete but it is catching on. It is the kind of enlightened view that is necessary to engender real equality and fairness. Achievement does not occur because you happen to have a penis. It occurs because of talent, male or female. It is not right for one party to prevent or diminish another from making those achievements simply because of her sex. When this mindset becomes the norm and no longer just a vestige of “feminism,” then we will see the day that sexual discrimination and harassment begin to disappear from the workplace.

We are not there yet, but that has never stopped women from trying, from getting ahead. Female staff now occupy more than half the Chiefs roles on the Democratic side of Congress and a similarly significant percentage on the Republican side. There are female Staff Directors at the top of key committees. Salaries for women still lag behind those for men but the gulf is shrinking every year. With women in charge, offices are more sensitized to harassment and discrimination than ever before, and work to keep abuse from occurring—a significant, if somewhat perverse, outcome of women having survived harassment at earlier stages of their careers.

Even so, much of the ol’ boys network is still in place. But that is why I’m so thankful for Harvey Weinstein. Now, maybe, his disastrous and hyper-public fall from grace will be the catalyst we need so women no longer have to suffer silently, no longer have to choose between their dignity or their job, no longer have to accept that sexual office games are an acceptable path to success.

What will make the difference in this scandal du jour is whether or not men finally stand up and say “enough is enough.” That is what has been missing from all the other, previous incidents of this nature and what really drove women to remain silent in the past: there were no men to back them up. Where were the men when Gretchen Carlson outed Rogers Ailes? When Anita Hill outed Clarence Thomas? Where were the men when Donald Trump boasted about assaulting women? They turned a blind eye.

But if the Weinstein affair results in brothers going after brothers to admonish them for their behavior, then we really will have turned the corner. It will mean that women have broken through that veneer of second classness and that men know it. Women will be on par with men and men will not stand for anti-women shenanigans from their bros anymore.

Until then, women will work with other women as they always have—to overcome these sexual obstacles, to support each other during crises, and to push for what is right. They will take lessons from the women who have gone before them and build on their experiences, good and bad. No human being should be made to feel less than human because she is female. Women get that. Now it is time for the other half to get it, too.
