

October 7, 2004 Thursday Final Edition

HARASSMENT ISSUES STILL LINGER; A NEW STUDY SUGGESTS THE PROCESS FOR DEALING WITH HARASSMENT IS DANGEROUS TO WOMEN.

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SECTION: CITY & REGION; Pg. C1

LENGTH: 522 words

Despite vows the killing of a Chatham woman by her boss in 1996 would spark change, workplace harassment is still a grim reality for Ontario women, a new study says.

"We believe the complaints process, as it exists, is dangerous to women," said the University of Western Ontario's Barb MacQuarrie, one of the report's authors.

"Part of the problem is the fear around acknowledging we have a problem."

The report, published by the Centre for Research on Violence against Women and Children, was sparked by the death of Theresa Vince, who was killed by Russell Davis, the manager of the Sears store in Chatham, after he relentlessly harassed her.

Vince's daughter, Jacquie Carr, is one of the authors of the report. It took four years to research and comes after in-depth interviews with 67 women across the province.

"I hope this report will make some real changes," Carr said yesterday

"This report isn't just about my mom, it's about every woman's story who has been harassed," she said.

Saying there are "huge gaps" in the complaints process, Carr said researching the report was both sad and empowering for her.

One of the main recommendations from the 116-page report is a call for the Labour Ministry to tighten the Occupation Health and Safety Act to better protect complainants.

Carr said had that change been in place a decade ago, it could have helped her mother.

"There would have been an immediate investigation. It would have helped because we know harassment escalates if it's not stopped by an authority figure," she said.

"The victim can't stop it, an authority figure must -- an authority figure who has the ability to convey consequences."

Leaving that to a human rights complaint -- a process which can take more than a year -- doesn't help women, she added.

Pointing out the average time for a complaint that requires an investigation is more than 17 months, Carr said: "In that time, my mother was dead."

That's why it's crucial there be a process involving an immediate investigation and the ability to refuse work in a place that's unsafe because of harassment, she said.

Release of the report and interest in it gives Carr "a little hope" change is possible.

The report, which contains 10-pages of specific recommendations, confirmed what the authors had heard anecdotally and documents the dire consequences that often result when victims seek redress.

"Women reported losing their jobs or careers, experiencing damaged relationships with co-workers, being labelled troublemakers, losing friends and undergoing stress with family members," the report says.

"Loss of sleep, nervousness, loss of financial security, loss of self-esteem, guilt, fear, self-blame were all named as health-related and personal consequences of harassment."

It also recommends government funding for support services.

Women are not only sexually harassed, but harassed for any difference they may have -- whether it's sexual orientation, disability, ethnicity, or language, MacQuarrie said.

Ontario Labour Minister Chris Bentley called the report helpful but offered no specific funding commitments.