

Young women most at risk; SEXUAL HARASSMENT: Anita Hill will speak tomorrow at a London conference

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Young women starting their first jobs are most at risk of sexual harassment, says Anita Hill, who was thrust under a global spotlight on the issue 18 years ago.

"Harassment is a particular problem among teenagers," said Hill, who will speak tomorrow at a London conference on workplace safety and respect.

"These women are so vulnerable and don't have realistic expectations of what a workplace should be," Hill said from Brandeis University near Boston, where she teaches social policy, law and women's studies.

Hill raised allegations of sexual harassment against her former boss, Clarence Thomas, during his U.S. Senate confirmation as a Supreme Court justice in 1991.

A divided Senate narrowly upheld Thomas's nomination, in a process he likened to "a high-tech lynching," but the case boosted awareness of workplace harassment.

Hill told The Free Press young women are especially vulnerable to harassment because they're new to the job market.

"This could be their first-week experience," she said. "I think that is the most vulnerable population right now -- either people who are having their first work experience or their first professional work experience."

Hill will speak at Safe, Respectful and Inclusive Workplaces, a conference at the London Convention Centre organized by the Centre for Research and Education on Violence against Women and Children at the University of Western Ontario.

Hill said she'll talk about workplace violence as a responsibility for individuals, employers and lawmakers to focus on.

"For years, so much of the conversation has focused on the individual involved," she said.

"The woman should leave the violent situation. The men who are engaging in the behaviour should be punished for it. All of that is true, but it doesn't tell us what responsibility the employer has for creating a safe environment or the responsibility that law makers have to promote and interpret law to promote safety.

"Everyone has a responsibility."

Hill praised Canadian inquests such as the one that will be presented at the conference, the Dupont inquest, called after a male doctor killed himself and his ex-girlfriend, nurse Lori Dupont, at Hotel-Dieu Grace Hospital in Windsor in 2005.

Twenty-six recommendations came out of the coroner's inquest.

"In that sense, Canada should be applauded -- that doesn't always take place here (in the U.S.)," Hill said.

Eliminating workplace violence will take individuals, employers, governments and policy makers working together, Hill said. "I hear from people every week about sexual harassment in the workplace."

Almost two decades since she spoke out against Thomas, who still sits on the Supreme Court, Hill said she thinks the definition of sexual harassment is now broader and the public's awareness of it better.

"Sexual harassment is not the only problem women face in the workplace . . . but it so typifies what can happen to women and how women can be devalued." she said