



KEEPING TABS

In an industry that employs thousands of women in Portland, sexual harassment and assault are widespread and often unreported. Meet the people who are trying to change that.

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CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Fifteen women have recently come forward with allegations that a powerful figure in the West Coast cocktail scene assaulted them. The women, some from Portland, are sounding the alarm through a blog, "The Reality of Sexual Assault in the Cocktail Community," with graphic and often difficult-to-read entries about their personal experiences.

Their homepage states: "We want to stimulate a dialogue about what happened to us, why we sat in silence hurting for so long, how we can help others have a voice and how we can end sexual assault."



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JESSICA ROSENGRANT,
PORTLAND BARTENDER AND
CO-FOUNDER OF NOT OK PDX

One of the accusers, Jeanelle Owings, of Portland, told Street Roots that she came forward because "silence keeps people sick. It's so important to speak out because this is happening to everybody."

According to a 2014 report from Restaurant Opportunities Centers United, there are "endemic" levels of harassment in the service industry, with at

least 90 percent of women working in restaurants as tipped employees dealing with it in some form.

The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission cites the restaurant industry as the "single largest" source of sexual harassment claims in the U.S. Many women

working in the service industry in Portland told Street Roots sexual harassment and assault were rampant but seldom reported.

"I don't know any woman who's spent any time in a bar who hasn't been harassed and hasn't felt safe," said Jessica Rosengrant, a longtime Portland bartender and survivor of sexual assault. "People just don't realize how pervasive it is."

Rachel Debely, a server at a busy downtown Portland pub, grew weary when a new manager started to make lewd suggestions, once telling her to "hike up her skirt" if she wanted to earn more tips. She asked him to stop, but he refused. When she noticed him being sexually suggestive to her co-worker, a minor, she decided to take action.

"I knew I needed to stop it," Debely said. "So I made a phone call to his boss." In the end, the perpetrator was dismissed from the company.

Sexual harassment is "much more prevalent than most think" in the service industry, Debely said. "But most girls don't report it because they try to put it out of their minds," she said, "or they don't feel comfortable reporting it to their management staff for fear of not being taken seriously and losing shifts."

The incidence rate of sexual harassment in the service industry is difficult to pin down for several reasons. Few complaints are formally filed with the state labor agency.

From 2011 to 2016, the Oregon Bureau of Labor and Industries has investigated 87 complaints of sexual harassment in the service industry in Clackamas, Washington

and Multnomah counties, making up about 18 percent of the sexual harassment complaints in all industries combined.

Furthermore, an inquiry into the Oregon Judicial Department found that its criminal case tracking isn't specific to an industry or location of a crime, but instead focuses on the type of case or the specific statute violated – for example, "sex offense." The numbers aren't any easier to pinpoint on the civil side, in which court records list torts but do not narrow down which are related to sexual assault and harassment.

"There are just no good statistics because it so often goes unreported," Rosengrant said. "It's the rape culture that makes people feel that they deserve the treatment and don't recognize it as problematic."

The statistics might not be there, but the problem is.

Rosengrant detailed her experience: "I was followed home from the bar by a guy who worked with me. He tried to force himself on me. I told him to fuck off, but he grabbed me. So I pulled out my phone and was able to get him to leave me alone that way. Having someone on the other end of the line makes a difference."

Local workers' stories

Given the lack of data, Street Roots interviewed more than 15 women and five men from different types of establishments in the Portland bar and restaurant scene, in addition to several online accounts, to get an idea of how prevalent sexual harassment

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