

# Skimpy outfits, matching underwear and not-so-sexy sexual harassment

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Last week Madison Marriage, an undercover reporter for the Financial Times, posed as a hostess at the annual Presidents Club Charity Dinner. This week, she reported how the men-only event included 130 specially hired hostesses, who were told to wear skimpy black outfits with matching underwear and high-heels and were allegedly groped and sexually harassed by those attending. Do employers have a part to play in this and if so, what lessons can be learnt?

If the reports are accurate, some of the conduct at the event would likely constitute sexual harassment and, potentially, criminal sexual assault. So it is not surprising that many high-profile individuals are now seeking to distance themselves and their organisations from the event and the Presidents Club in general. As they do so we have learnt – worryingly – that those in attendance at the charity dinner read like a who's who of the City.

The City has faced a big problem in being perceived as a 'boys club', where managers and employees alike may have to participate in heavy drinking and testosterone-fuelled activities to climb the greasy pole. Socialising, networking with business contacts and even doing business in strip or pole dancing clubs suggests a sexist, macho culture that excludes women (and some men) and has opened some City firms and institutions up to sex discrimination lawsuits. This recent FT report reinforces that perception.

The event was for men only – itself an outmoded concept, but still permissible by law – but it is almost inconceivable that the reported conduct would have been tolerated at a mixed event. As it is, the risk of reputational damage is likely to be the biggest cost to those involved and those associated with the event. However, do not ignore the risk that a female working for an employer whose senior executives attended the charity dinner might add that in to a discrimination claim that she might already be thinking of making.

The real question for employers is whether they should condone their staff going to events at which women are likely to be harassed, demeaned and objectified. That shift in culture must come from the top, which means CEOs and other senior executives questioning whether such men-only events are really the way the City wants to be perceived – or where they personally want to be seen.

As we have seen with the Weinstein and Spacey scandals, this incident could be the tip of the iceberg. First Hollywood, then politics and now the City – this report does little to enhance the reputation of an industry which is already seen as dominated by a wealthy male elite. It reinforces a perception of the City which is in need of change and which, with the help of reports like that by the Financial Times, might eventually see that change. Employers who are ahead of the curve in prohibiting men-only events, as well as more visibly unacceptable networking events, will be the ones to gain. A workplace in which men and women alike are treated with respect will eventually see the impact where, in business, it matters most: financial performance.

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