#MeToo Five Years Later: Progress & Pitfalls in State Workplace Anti-Harassment Laws

National Women’s Law Center

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INTRODUCTION

In the hours, days, and months after #MeToo went viral in October 2017, state lawmakers started working to reform workplace anti-harassment laws, which the outpouring of stories and experiences had revealed as outdated and ineffective. Many lawmakers were quick to take action because they too were survivors, sharing their own stories alongside millions worldwide.

Now, five years later, **22 states and the District of Columbia** have passed a total of **more than 70** workplace anti-harassment bills,¹ many with bipartisan support.

But even with these reforms, our workplace protections are still coming up short. Some of the most critical reforms for shifting our ability to prevent and stop workplace harassment, like protections against **retaliation**, have largely been overlooked. Many workers most marginalized by workplace harassment have been left without full or any legal protections. #MeToo amplified the movement Tarana Burke started to center the voices of Black survivors and others most marginalized by sexual violence, but the policy response has not adequately centered Black women or other women of color, immigrant women, women with disabilities, LGBTQI+ people, or women working in low-paid jobs. In addition, workers in large swaths of the Midwest, South, and Mountain states have seen few, if any, workplace anti-harassment policy reforms since #MeToo went viral.

Robust protections against harassment are needed. Today, the very public backlash in response to momentum in gender and racial justice advocacy efforts is impacting women at work. Abortion bans and restrictions, state laws attacking trans students and prohibiting teaching about race, bans on workplace anti-discrimination and implicit bias trainings, and defamation lawsuits against survivors of sexual violence, for example, all feed gendered and racialized power dynamics at work that increase incidents of harassment. Policy has a key role to play in transforming workplaces, but without lawmakers’ continuing commitment to survivor justice, the immense gains of the last five years risk being rolled back.

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¹ Many bills have been passed with bipartisan support. Conservative and progressive states alike have passed workplace anti-harassment legislation, but nearly 60% of states have been progressive, coastal states. Women of color and low-paid workers have not fully benefited from many of these reform efforts.
TOP STATE POLICY TRENDS SINCE #METOO WENT VIRAL

- **16 states limited or prohibited employers** from requiring employees to sign nondisclosure agreements as a condition of employment or as part of a settlement agreement.
- **13 states and D.C. have implemented or strengthened anti-harassment training requirements** for certain employers or required employer anti-harassment policies.
- **11 states and D.C. expanded workplace harassment protections to more workers**, including independent contractors, domestic workers, interns, volunteers, and/or employees of smaller employers.
- **Nine states extended the statute of limitations** for filing a harassment or discrimination claim.

STATES THAT HAVE PASSED WORKPLACE ANTI-HARASSMENT PROTECTIONS SINCE #METOO WENT VIRAL

Shaded states are states that have passed one or more workplace anti-harassment protections in the following categories: ensuring all working people are covered by harassment protections; restoring worker power and increasing employer transparency and accountability; expanding access to justice; and promoting prevention strategies. **Click here for bill details by state.**
PROGRESS MADE IN RESTORING WORKER VOICE, EXPANDING ACCESS TO JUSTICE, AND INSTITUTING BASELINE PREVENTION MEASURES

ENDING THE ABUSE OF NONDISCLOSURE AGREEMENTS (NDAS) TO SILENCE SURVIVORS

SIXTEEN STATES: (AZ, CA, HI, IL, LA, ME, MD, NJ, NM, NY, NV, OR, TN, VT, VA, WA) have passed legislation banning employers from using NDAs to prevent employees from speaking up about harassment and discrimination or limiting employers’ ability to do so. This has consistently been the largest anti-harassment policy trend since #MeToo went viral, driven both by what the Me Too movement revealed about the power of women speaking out and sharing their experiences of harassment and by the significant press attention paid to Harvey Weinstein and other high-profile people and employers who used NDAs to silence survivors and hide ongoing harassment.

States passing these new laws have fairly consistently banned employers from imposing these types of NDAs as a condition of getting or keeping a job. But states have been reluctant to completely ban NDAs in settlement agreements out of concern that doing so could take away an important bargaining chip for a survivor to obtain relief from an employer without having to file a lawsuit; many worry employers will be less likely to agree to provide anything to those who have experienced harassment without a guarantee of their silence. Some survivors may also want an assurance of confidentiality. As a result, new state NDA laws have given survivors the option to request an NDA in a settlement, or only limited the circumstances in which a settlement can include an NDA (e.g. prior to a survivor filing a charge with a state agency) or the repercussions for breaking an NDA. In 2022, however, this started to change: Hawai‘i and Washington amended their previously passed NDA reform laws to fully ban NDAs in all agreements, including settlements, that prevent employees from discussing sexual harassment, in Hawai‘i’s case, or from discussing any type of workplace discrimination, retaliation, or wage and hour violations, in Washington’s case.

Initial reports from several employee rights attorneys in California and New Jersey (where relatively strong NDA reforms passed in 2018 and 2019, respectively) suggest these new laws are reducing the number of NDAs in settlements that would silence survivors from speaking about harassment or discrimination.
MANDATING EMPLOYER ANTI-HARASSMENT TRAININGS AND POLICIES

TWELVE STATES (CA, CT, DE, IL, LA, MD, NV, NJ, NY, VT, VA, WA) and D.C. have passed laws requiring certain employers to provide anti-sexual harassment training and eight states (CT, IL, LA, NV, NY, OR, VA, WA) have passed laws requiring employers to adopt workplace anti-harassment policies. Of the training laws, most are limited to public employers, like state agencies, or to state contractors. Only five states—California, Illinois, Connecticut, Delaware, and New York—passed laws mandating private and public employers of a certain size provide such training.

In theory, anti-harassment policies and trainings are necessary baseline protections that can help reduce workplace harassment, but the efficacy of training requirements has long been in question. Research shows that sexual harassment trainings are often ineffective because they are routinely reduced to one-size-fits-all videos focused on compliance with the law, instead of focusing on workplace culture shifts that could prevent harassment. Some of the new state training requirements seek to make trainings more effective by requiring they be interactive, include examples, and, in the case of states like California, encourages discussion of bystander intervention. Still, some advocates have raised concerns that these laws and the “model trainings” that some state agencies are required to produce set an unhelpfully low baseline that disincentivizes employers from doing more robust trainings and, most importantly, tailoring their training to their workplace.

Legislative efforts like that led by the ¡Ya Basta! Coalition and Immigrant Women Rising in California—a movement of janitors and allies mobilized by SEIU-USWW—present a promising approach to training laws. In 2018, the coalition organized and secured legislation requiring janitorial industry employers to provide industry-specific, trauma-informed, and culturally aware trainings conducted through peer-to-peer education.
PROTECTING ALL WORKERS FROM DISCRIMINATION AND HARASSMENT

ELEVEN STATES and D.C. have made important progress in ensuring all workers have legal protection from discrimination and harassment regardless of the size of their employer or their employment classification. Still, over half the states carve out smaller employers from workplace discrimination and/or harassment protections, leaving workers with little to no recourse when they are harassed. In even more states, anti-discrimination and harassment protections only apply to “employees,” leaving out the growing segment of workers classified as “independent contractors,” and sometimes leaving out domestic workers who have often been carved out of the definition of “employees” for racist and sexist reasons. Women of color and immigrants make up many of the low-paid gig workers, domestic workers, and home healthcare workers that are impacted by these carve outs.

Six states—Connecticut, New York, Illinois, Maryland, Texas, and Arizona—extended anti-discrimination or harassment protections to all employers, regardless of size. Four states—New York, Illinois, Maryland, Vermont—and D.C. also extended their anti-discrimination or harassment protections to independent contractors. Two states—Virginia and Colorado—included domestic workers in their anti-discrimination protections and South Dakota and Delaware included interns in their anti-discrimination protections and anti-sexual harassment protections, respectively.

EXTENDING THE STATUTE OF LIMITATIONS FOR FILING A WORKPLACE HARASSMENT OR DISCRIMINATION CLAIM

NINE STATES, from Texas to California, have passed laws extending the amount of time an employee has to file a discrimination or harassment claim. Many state laws only provide employees 180 or 300 days to file a legal claim, which is woefully inadequate when someone is dealing with the trauma of assault or harassment. This is a particularly important area of reform for low-paid workers, who otherwise are often forced to choose between using their time and energy to get another job to support their family or finding legal counsel, bringing a harassment claim, and seeking justice.

While it is encouraging to see the momentum on this issue from conservative and progressive states alike, only three of the nine states passed extensions that would provide employees adequate time to bring a complaint: California extended its statute of limitations for all workplace discrimination claims from one to three years, Oregon from one to five years, and Vermont from three to six years. New York and Maryland extended their statutes of limitations to three years, but, in New York’s case, only for sexual harassment claims, and in Maryland’s case, only for harassment claims.

The other states that have passed this type of reform have either allowed for the deadline to be paused while the employee’s claim is being investigated by an enforcement agency (Nevada) or extended their statute of limitations from 180 to 300 days (Texas, Colorado, Connecticut); this is important progress given that 180 days is woefully inadequate, but it must only be a first step in reform efforts on this issue. And, unfortunately, this area of policy reform has also seen roll-backs: in 2021, Ohio shortened its statute of limitations for workplace discrimination claims from six to two years.

TEXAS MAKES PROGRESS ON IMPORTANT REFORMS OTHER STATES ARE AVOIDING

In a state where some lawmakers have spent much of the last five years (and prior) attacking the rights of women and queer and trans people, advocates have made important progress on some meaningful workplace anti-harassment reforms that other states have hesitated to initiate. In 2021, Texas passed legislation extending anti-sexual harassment laws to cover smaller employers who had previously been carved out of the law. Now employers of every size have anti-sexual harassment obligations under Texas law. Texas also extended its statute of limitations for filing a sexual harassment claim from 180 to 300 days—still an inadequate amount of time for a worker to access justice, but important progress. In other states, lawmakers have pushed back on similar reforms, arguing that requiring small businesses to prohibit harassment would “burden” such businesses.
LITTLE PROGRESS ON REFORMS TO FUNDAMENTALLY SHIFT OUR ABILITY TO PREVENT AND STOP HARASSMENT

STATES FAILING TO ADDRESS ONE OF THE BIGGEST PROBLEMS EXPERIENCED BY SURVIVORS: RETALIATION

WORKPLACE RETALIATION is staggeringly common for those who speak up about harassment and can be especially severe for those working in low-paid jobs, which are disproportionately women, with women of color and immigrant women particularly over-represented. Of those who have reported sexual harassment to the TIME’S UP Legal Defense Fund, over 70% reported they had been retaliated against when they complained about harassment, including being demoted or fired, receiving poor performance reviews, or being threatened with legal action, losing their job, or even physical harm. Retaliation, and the threat of retaliation, is one of the main reasons people do not report sexual harassment in the first place and helps hide the true extent of sexual harassment within a workplace.

Yet, since #MeToo went viral, state lawmakers have passed few reforms to stop retaliation and ensure survivors, especially those in low-paid jobs, can speak up. Low-paid workers need stronger anti-retaliation protections and protections that clearly identify certain behavior as retaliatory: for example, immigration-related threats. Progress on these reforms has been minimal. In 2022, Georgia passed a law providing county and city employees and anyone working in a similar capacity recourse against retaliation for speaking up about sexual harassment—a limited, but important step. New York strengthened its existing anti-retaliation laws to make clear that disclosing an employee’s personnel files, contacting immigration authorities, or threatening to report an employee’s immigration status could be considered retaliatory acts. Connecticut passed a law prohibiting an employer from relocating an employee, assigning them to a different work schedule, or making any other substantive changes to their employment in response to the employee reporting sexual harassment, unless the employee agrees in writing.

And while more states are extending anti-discrimination protections that include anti-retaliation protections to previously excluded workers, too many low-paid workers, women of color, and immigrant workers still do not have basic anti-retaliation protections. This should be a priority focus of workplace policy reforms in every state as these workers experience some of the highest rates of workplace harassment and most severe repercussions for speaking out.

Low-paid workers can also be fearful of speaking out against sexual harassment because employers will put “no-rehire” provisions in settlement agreements to bar employees from ever working for the employer again. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) views these provisions as retaliatory when used against employees who come forward about harassment and discrimination, and they can be devastating to a low-paid worker’s ability to find a new job. Since #MeToo went viral, only Vermont, Oregon, and California have prohibited or limited the use of “no-rehire” provisions.
Retaliation is also increasingly popping up in the form of harassers filing, or threatening to file, defamation lawsuits, also known as Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) against survivors who report harassment. People who file SLAPPs do not necessarily expect to win in court, but SLAPPs are still effective at silencing victims because defending against even the most baseless lawsuit can still require considerable time and money. Since #MeToo went viral, only Washington, New York, and California have enacted or amended “anti-SLAPP” laws to ensure that victims of sex-based misconduct are protected from SLAPPs when they speak out about the abuse, when they file complaints with authorities (including schools and employers), and when they sue their abusers in court.

Workers also need multiple, trusted avenues for reporting, including anonymously. Confidential helplines that are independent of an employer can play an important role in increasing reporting and stopping harassment and retaliation. Since #MeToo went viral, only Illinois, New York, and New Jersey have set up independent helplines.

Finally, foundational to stopping retaliation are reforms that rectify the deep power imbalances in many workplaces; for example, raising the tipped minimum wage so tipped workers would no longer have to tolerate harassment from customers and management to make ends meet. In D.C. and Michigan, measures that raised the tipped minimum wage to match the regular minimum wage have actually been rolled back or become mired in legal challenges since #MeToo went viral.

**STATES FAILING TO MODERNIZE LEGAL DEFINITION OF HARASSMENT AND HOLD EMPLOYERS ACCOUNTABLE**

**REFORMS** that would more fundamentally shift employers’ incentive and ability to prevent harassment have also proven challenging to advance. Most states continue to have definitions of unlawful harassment that require harassing conduct to be “severe or pervasive” to be considered unlawful. This standard has been interpreted by some courts in such an unduly restrictive manner that only the most egregious conduct qualifies. These interpretations do not reflect modern understandings of harassing conduct and have for too long allowed employers and courts to minimize and ignore the impact and reality of workplace harassment and power dynamics, especially for low-paid workers and women of color and others who experience intersectional harassment. Since #MeToo went viral, only California, New York, Maryland, and D.C. have succeeded in updating their definition for what constitutes illegal workplace harassment.

Moreover, in many states, the monetary relief available to victims of harassment is inadequate to compensate victims and hold employers accountable. Compensatory damages can compensate victims of harassment for out-of-pocket expenses and emotional harm caused by harassment, and punitive damages awarded to victims punish employers who acted maliciously or recklessly in engaging in harassment. However, compensatory and punitive damages are capped in harassment and other discrimination cases under federal law and many state laws; in some states, they are not available at all. This can make it incredibly difficult for a worker to find an attorney who can take their case, especially low-paid workers whose potential financial recovery for lost wages is often low. Since #MeToo went viral, only Virginia, New York, and Connecticut have increased the financial relief available to harassment victims to an amount that would meaningfully incentivize employers to address and prevent harassment.
WOMEN OF COLOR AND OTHERS WHO EXPERIENCE INTERSECTING DISCRIMINATION ARE NOT FULLY PROTECTED IN MANY OF THE REFORMS THAT HAVE PASSED

THE MEDIA CONVERSATION around workplace harassment in the wake of #MeToo going viral was initially driven by a focus on the experience of women in Hollywood and other wealthy white women victimized by sexual assault and harassment. The stories of women of color and low-paid workers who are most likely to experience harassment and the least likely to have the resources to address it were frequently left out. This critical omission is reflected not only in the failure to move laws that would be most impactful for women of color, immigrant women, and low-paid workers, as discussed above, but in reforms that apply narrowly to sexual harassment only.

Like sexual harassment, workplace discrimination and harassment based on race, disability, color, religion, age, or national origin all undermine workers’ equality, safety, and dignity—and these forms of harassment and discrimination often intersect in working people’s actual experiences. The sexual harassment a Black woman experiences, for example, may include racial slurs and reflect racial hostility. Indeed, EEOC charge data indicate that women of color—and Black women in particular—are disproportionately likely to experience sexual harassment at work, highlighting how race and sexual harassment are routinely intertwined. Moreover, sexual harassment often coincides with other forms of sex discrimination—including pay discrimination and pregnancy discrimination.

Legislation that focuses exclusively on sexual harassment has the odd and impractical result of providing a worker who experiences multiple, intersecting violations with only partial protection. This is seen starkly with each of the seven initial NDA laws passed in 2018, which only protected those who spoke out about sexual harassment or assault. As a result, women of color, for example, who experienced harassment that involved both racial slurs and sexual comments were not fully protected in speaking out about the full range of their experiences. Attorneys in some of these states report that sexual harassment-only NDAs provide loopholes for employers to easily evade the law when seeking to impose an NDA on, for example, a Black woman who experienced racialized sexual harassment.

Thanks to the advocacy of workers and survivors demanding intersectional policy solutions, most of these initial laws were amended to protect those who speak out about all forms
of discrimination and harassment. Nevertheless, NDA laws in seven states from Hawai‘i to Virginia to Tennessee still only provide protection for workers speaking about sexual harassment.

The exclusionary nature of this circumscribed approach is also evident in New York’s extension of its statute of limitations for sexual harassment claims only, which leaves a disabled woman, for example, unsure if she has one or three years to bring a claim because she was subjected to disability slurs and sexual comments. Similarly, an immigrant woman who worked in Vermont as an independent contractor or in Arizona or Texas for a smaller employer would have to navigate whether she has any protections at all under those states’ narrow expansions of sexual harassment protections to more workers.

To end workplace sexual harassment, lawmakers must craft solutions that address all forms of discrimination based on all protected characteristics as well as intersectional discrimination.

WORKERS IN LARGE SWATHS OF MIDWEST, SOUTH, AND MOUNTAIN STATES ARE STILL WORKING UNDER OUTDATED ANTI-HARASSMENT PROTECTIONS OR NO PROTECTIONS AT ALL

While legislative progress since #MeToo went viral is notable given that it has come from conservative and progressive states alike, the reality is that the vast majority of reforms—particularly the most meaningful reforms—have still been in progressive, coastal states (with the exception of Illinois), leaving large swaths of the Midwest, South, and Mountain states with outdated and ineffective workplace protections. And in some states, like Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi, those working for private employers do not even have the protection of a broad state law prohibiting employment discrimination on the basis of sex, race, and other characteristics.

Workers in these regions are particularly vulnerable to harassment because this is also where the current race and gender backlash has been strongest, especially against abortion access and trans rights. States in these regions also typically offer few other workplace protections like paid family leave, paid sick days, or fair scheduling requirements and have weak equal pay laws, which adds to the workplace power imbalances and economic precarity on which harassment thrives.

GEORGIA STARTS FROM SCRATCH

While other states are updating their outdated workplace harassment laws, gender justice and worker justice advocates in Georgia are having to start from scratch. That’s because Georgia doesn’t have a general employment discrimination law to protect all employees. In 2021, the Respect Georgia Workers Alliance (RGWA) formed to mobilize for more inclusive workplaces and create awareness around the lack of protections for workers in Georgia. RGWA is led by 9to5 Georgia and is made up of workers, advocates, and survivors of workplace discrimination and harassment who are leading the Alliance in building community power to stop harassment and discrimination. In 2022, RGWA helped get legislation introduced that would have ensured all Georgia public and private sector workers, including independent contractors, were protected from workplace harassment and retaliation, including those who experience intersectional harassment. But RGWA encountered push back from lawmakers who did not want to extend protections to private sector workers. Ultimately, RGWA succeeded in securing a first step towards broader protections: a new law to protect city and county employees and others working in a similar capacity (e.g. interns, independent contractors) from retaliation for speaking up about sexual harassment.
POLICY CHANGE MUST BE DRIVEN BY AND CENTERED ON THOSE MOST HARMED BY HARASSMENT. Workers and survivors should be shaping policy solutions to harassment. Their engagement will help ensure these policies actually meet the needs of those who experience sexual violence and other forms of harassment and discrimination. Policy change efforts should be designed in partnership with and focus on the needs of workers in low-paid jobs; women of color; queer, transgender, intersex, and gender non-conforming and nonbinary people; immigrant workers; and people with disabilities. Lawmakers must craft solutions that don’t just benefit those with the most privilege, financial resources, and access to legal systems. Instead, they need to focus on those who hold the least power in the workplace and for whom lack of financial resources, fear of retaliation, and lack of legal protections has made it impossible to truly hold employers accountable and shift workplace culture.

THE BE HEARD IN THE WORKPLACE ACT: A FEDERAL BILL AND A MODEL FOR STATE ACTION

Legislation has been introduced in Congress that addresses many of the shortcomings in the policy response since #MeToo went viral. In November 2021, U.S. House of Representatives Assistant Speaker Katherine Clark and Senator Patty Murray, Chair of the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee, reintroduced the Bringing an End to Harassment by Enhancing Accountability and Rejecting Discrimination (BE HEARD) in the Workplace Act—a landmark, comprehensive workplace anti-harassment bill. This bicameral bill has the support of 114 members of congress and over 50 civil rights, women’s rights, and workers’ rights organizations. While Congress has made limited progress on securing anti-harassment reforms since #MeToo went viral, BE HEARD can serve as a legislative model for states looking to carry the torch of workplace policy reform in the face of congressional inaction.

Specifically, the BE HEARD in the Workplace Act would:

- extend protections against all forms of discrimination, including harassment, to all workers;
- remove barriers to access to justice, such as short statutes of limitations and restrictively interpreted legal standards;
- promote transparency and accountability, including by limiting the use of abusive NDAs, prohibiting forced arbitration agreements, and requiring companies bidding on federal contracts to report any history of workers’ rights violations;
- and require and fund efforts to prevent workplace harassment and discrimination, including by requiring employers to adopt a nondiscrimination policy, requiring the EEOC to establish workplace training requirements and provide a model climate survey to employers, and ensuring that tipped workers are entitled to the same minimum wage as all other workers.
1 For the purposes of this report, our research focused primarily on workplace anti-discrimination and harassment reforms that covered public and private employers across industries and that supported the types of policy reform priorities identified by civil rights and survivor groups in *A call for legislative action to eliminate workplace harassment: Principles and Priorities.* This report does not cover reforms to state legislatures’ internal workplace harassment policies and processes.
