

Low-Cut Tops, Sexual Harassment and Bill O'Reilly

I'm not defending or accusing Bill O'Reilly, and I don't know if his antagonists are telling the truth. I'm simply asking a question: If a woman wears a low-cut top to work and a male colleague (or employer) looks at her cleavage, is that sexual harassment?

I asked my Twitter followers this question, and the responses were somewhat surprising. But before I share what they had to say, let me start with the appropriate caveats.

I'm not denying the reality of sexual harassment in the workplace.

I'm not denying that some men feel they have the right to treat women as sexual objects.

I'm not denying that many women feel constant pressure to dress and look sensually.

I'm not denying that some judges have outrageously implied that rape victims got what they deserved because of their scanty attire.

I'm not questioning or minimizing or excusing any of this. Not a chance.

What I'm questioning is whether it's sexual harassment if a woman wears suggestive attire and a man checks her out. Is she getting the desired results—namely, male attention—or is this a form of sexual harassment?

Again, I'm not justifying the man's behavior or the woman's attire. As a follower of Jesus, I do my best to look away from temptation, not toward it. And my wife and I taught our daughters never to dress in such a way as to appeal to male

lusts.

But if a woman comes to work in a very tight, very short mini-skirt and some male coworker checks out her legs, is he guilty of sexual harassment? Or, more generally, if he says to her, "That's a nice outfit!" has he sexually harassed her?

Perquita Burgess, one of O'Reilly's accusers, claimed he "would come by her desk and would leer at her up and down. She felt like he was looking at her cleavage and it made her feel uncomfortable."

If true, was this harassment? Perhaps it's one thing to glance and another thing to leer? Or was she displaying her cleavage for all to see? I'm simply asking questions.

She also claimed that "O'Reilly told her 'lookin' good there girl' one time when she was getting off the elevator."

What about this behavior? Can a friendly compliment be construed as sexual harassment (unless it was part of a larger complex of inappropriate comments)? Or is this just one more, exaggerated reaction from our hyper-PC culture in which almost everything is construed to be sexist or racist?

Remember that one campus listed complimentary comments to women such as, "I love your shoes!" as gender microaggressions, since it would suggest that females had nothing to offer other than nice attire.

Getting back to my Twitter poll, I asked, "If a woman wears a low-cut top to work, is it sexual harassment if a man checks her out?"

The four possible responses were: Yes (I'm female); No (I'm female); Yes (I'm male); No (I'm male).

My Twitter followers seem to be about two-thirds male (in contrast with my Facebook followers, who are about 55 percent female, especially in the older age groups). So the responses

to my poll were in keeping with the demographics, with men representing 68 percent of the responders and women 32 percent.

Interestingly, 81 percent of those responding answered with no. And check this out: The percentage of women answering no was virtually identical to that of men who answered No. How striking! (To be exact, of the 32 percent of women responding, 6 percent answered yes and 26 percent no; of the 68 percent of men responding, 13 percent answered yes and 55 percent no.)

So, not only did the vast majority of my respondents believe that this was not sexual harassment, but the women and men agreed.

One woman tweeted back to me: "That's why women wear revealing stuff, whether they admit or not. ... so men will look at them."

Another woman tweeted: "Totally agree. Females who say otherwise are dishonest. A person w/positive self-concept won't dress immodestly to get attention. Conversely, a female doesn't accidentally put a top on so her action hangs out. ... It's on PURPOSE! I see it on campus. Shorts so one literally sees the you know what. I find it repulsive not to mention unsanitary. Totally unnecessary!"

Yet another woman added: "Women should respect themselves more if they want to be respected!!!"

And still another: "If a woman displays herself are men expected to NOT look?"

And another: "Touching is obviously a no no. But why not dress modestly at work? I don't mean up to the chin, but not so low. Or tight. Show respect."

And one more: "If a woman displays herself are men expected to NOT look?"

(Remember: These were all women expressing these views.)

One man did feel that to check the woman out was harassment. But, he added, "do women have a responsibility of addressing themselves properly? Men are visual. Let's be real."

Not all, however, agreed.

One woman wrote: "Next step: 'Please wear a burka because it's your responsibility if I find you attractive and can't rule myself.'"

Interestingly, when I clicked on the bio of this Tweeter, her description was short and to the point: "Liberal and atheist." Perhaps her response is not so surprising?

From the totally opposite perspective, one man asked: "I'd also like to know how many men feel uncomfortable when a woman wears a 'low cut top' to work? Isn't that sexual harassment?"

Who wants to open that can of worms?

All this being said, I trust we agree that: 1. making a woman feel uncomfortable because of her looks is inappropriate; 2. our airbrushed, super-model culture puts women under extra pressure to present themselves a certain way; 3. and men can sometimes act like male animals chasing a female dog in heat.

But is it sexual harassment if a man compliments a female coworker's attire (in non-lewd terms)? Or is it sexual harassment if a man's eyes are drawn to a female coworker's highly accentuated areas? I think not.

What do you think? {eoa}