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Emily

Before #MeToo: The History of the 9to5 Job Survival Hotline

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When Sharon Kinsella arrived at her office in Cleveland, Ohio, she pressed play on the blinking answering machine. It was her job to transcribe the messages from the machine, research the problems, and return the calls. Overnight, a woman who worked in a factory called and left a message. The message told a disturbing story…The soap dispenser in women's bathroom at her workplace was not filled with soap as she and her female colleagues had logically assumed. It was filled with semen. According to the message, her male colleagues had been ejaculating into the soap dispenser for some time and the women had been none the wiser, until now. It was reports from the field such as this one that led to the establishment of a national hotline called the 9to5 Job Survival Hotline. This essay explores the history of the Job Survival Hotline and how it was used a grassroots tool to combat sexual harassment in the 1980s and 1990s. Understanding the historical struggles of working women is essential for building a movement to end sexual violence in the workplace; otherwise, we risk missing critical strategies and lessen opportunities for collaboration across gender, race, class, and occupational distinctions.

Karen Nussbaum and Ellen Cassedy were best friends and both working as clerical typists at Harvard University when they came together with eight other Boston area office workers to establish 9to5. Inspired by years of protesting against the Vietnam War and in support

of civil rights, Nussbaum began to realize that she could organize in her own workplace. Nussbaum recalls, "We met for a year. We met once a week for a year and we told each our stories about how we got to be where we were and what we thought and what were our values and we went through this whole experience and then we talked about what kind of an organization we wanted to create."[1] Initially, the group began publishing a newsletter called, "9to5: Newsletter for Boston Area Office Workers" with the intention of sharing what it was like to work in the clerical industry. They handed out the newsletter around town to women heading into work, and soon women began to respond to the newsletter. They held their first meeting at the YWCA in November 1973 and over 150 women turned out.[2] Over the next few years, the organization "continually [had] actions." They set "achievable goals" that allowed for a grassroots mobilization putting the membership out in front as spokespeople. According to Nussbaum, "We defined our goals as being understandable…it wasn't about radical analysis…It was more: you've got a problem on the job. It's probably related to the fact that you're a woman, and it's not any accident."[3]

This was an ideology that resonated with the increasing number of women entering the workforce in the 1970s and 1980s. As historian Katherine Turk notes, uncovering this history of women's working-class activism "…reframes gendered fracture…as a productive opening of ideological space that gave rise to robust and experimental conceptions of equality and related activism that necessarily transcended New Deal masculine conceptions of democracy."[4] The

[1] Karen Nussbaum, Interview by Kathleen Banks Nutter, Voice of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, December 18-19, 2003, 20. See also, Chapter 7, "9to5: Framing a New Doorway" in Lane Windham, *Knocking on Labor's Door: Union Organizing in the 1970s and the Roots of a New Economic Divide,"* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017).
[2] Karen Nussbaum, 2003, 20-22.
[3] Karen Nussbaum, 2003, 23.
[4] Katherine Turk, *Equality on Trial: Gender and Rights in the Modern American Workplace* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 9.

women who founded 9to5 "pioneered a new form of labor organizing," as historian Lane Windham notes, "one built on New Deal traditions and legal structures, as well as the tactics and legal strategies of the contemporaneous women's movement."[5] By the 1980s, the primary occupation for women was office work resulting in 7 million women working in an office setting. To put this in perspective, the number of women working as elementary school teachers at the same time was a mere 1.7 million. Furthermore, over 55 percent of adult women were now working outside the home as compared to a generation earlier when only 34 percent were working outside the home. The 7 million women working in office jobs represent a drastic shift away from formal economy jobs such as manufacturing, domestic labor, and other service labor jobs. Another factor was the rapid decline of unionization. In states like Ohio, Wisconsin, Massachusetts, and Illinois where 9to5 was especially strong, unionization rates were cut in half.[6] Women, who formerly would have followed their brothers and fathers into the factory, were now finding themselves working in office jobs that provided low pay, minimal benefits, and no union protection. This is not to say that unionized jobs were insulated from sexist and racist behavior by co-workers and bosses. Nor is it to say that unions historically have handled sexual harassment claims well. In fact, the failure of unions to represent the needs of women and workers of color is one critical factor in the decline of unionization. However, it is an important dynamic because it meant that women workers by and large did not have any workplace system or organization to respond to their experiences of sexual harassment. As one 9to5 organizer in Baltimore recalled, "I'd meet women for lunch to talk about 9to5 and would hear, over and over, women expressing a sense of relief that finally there was a group hearing and action on their

[5] Windham, 153.
[6] NPR, "Fifty Years of Shrinking Union Membership," https://www.npr.org/sections/money/2015/02/23/385843576/50-years-of-shrinking-union-membership-in-one-map Accessed on February 18, 2020.

unspoken concerns and aspirations."[7] In short, they needed to create their own, hence the early success of 9to5.

9to5 launched their first hotline in 1980 when female employees at Boston's John Hancock Company were frustrated at the lack of childcare, low pay, and health and safety issues associated with the increased prevalence of video display terminals (VDTs). The calls generated from the hotline allowed 9to5 to "…survey workers, distribute informational leaflets and to organize an employee committee."[8] 9to5 has been organizing in red states or "right to work" states far before it became the "right thing to do." In the 1980s, the organization had multiple local and state hotlines to educate women workers on their rights on the job. As Karen Nussbaum told the Chicago Tribune in 1989, "We're [9to5] not a union but in some of the right-to-work states, clerical workers are uncertain they have any rights at all."[9] They had regional hotlines in Georgia, Tennessee, North Carolina, and South Carolina were primarily staffed by volunteers. Volunteers were trained to listen and direct callers to the proper resource. They were not lawyers or legal professionals. Instead, they were everyday women who were frustrated by the lack of response by government agencies such as the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC).

From its inception, the EEOC was an under-resourced and disregarded agency. Upon opening, the commission was saddled with a backlog of over one thousand complaints. By late 1966, the EEOC was facing over eighty thousand unresolved complaints.[10] Many women put their hopes on the potential of the EEOC. However, 9to5 took this potential to the next level.

[7] Cindia Cameron, "Noon at 9 to 5: Reflections on a Decade of Organizing," *Labor Research Review* 1:8 (1986), 105.
[8] Carol Kleiman, "From hot tips to cold facts, dial up 9to5 hotlines," *Chicago Tribune,* 11/27/89.
[9] Carol Kleiman, "From hot tips to cold facts, dial up 9to5 hotlines," *Chicago Tribune,* 11/27/89.
[10] Turk, 13.

They published an "Office Workers' Bill of Rights" and used street actions and theater to pressure employers to improve working conditions. The slogan "Raises, Rights and Respect" harkened back to the 1912 Bread and Roses strikes of New England factory workers, and 9to5 used this messaging as they appeared on "…the doorstep of a company to dramatize conditions of unfair treatment…"[11] However, 9to5's organizing tactics quickly drew the attention of management. Chambers of Commerce and management consultants began to offer trainings on "how to control or 'manage' white-collar workers and 'militant feminists' like 9to5."[12] Also, some in the organization believed that relying on government agencies such as the EEOC might encourage 9to5 members to rely on outside actors to solve workplace inequities rather than building power their own organization.

In 1988, 9to5 launched a national toll-free number-based Cleveland, Ohio called the Job Survival Hotline hoping that it would help to "develop a vision of a much larger organization" and "learn more about the problems facing working women and to help millions of women who work in offices around the country."[13] Using grant money, 9to5 was able to hire one full-time position to staff the Job Survival Hotline during business hours and, in the evening, callers could leave a message on the answering machine. They hired Sharon Kinsella as the Hotline staffer.

Kinsella was described as a "brash, quick-witted, mother of three" who evolved into what some call "a radical feminist and strident working-class flag waver" staffed the hotline six hours a day. She was one of those people "you could never knock down" who had experienced many of the things that women were reporting to the hotline. "I think that came through in how she

[11] Cindia Cameron, "Noon at 9 to 5: Reflections on a Decade of Organizing," *Labor Research Review* 1:8 (1986), 107.
[12] Cindia Cameron, "Noon at 9 to 5: Reflections on a Decade of Organizing," *Labor Research Review* 1:8 (1986), 107.
[13] *Business as Usual,* 2.

counseled women," recalled Barbara Otto, a former 9to5 staff member who worked closely with Kinsella in Cleveland.[14] Kinsella was a working-class Midwestern white woman who did not grow up marching with Gloria Steinem and reading *Ms. Magazine*. Her feminist consciousness was born out of workplace discrimination. Having grown up in northern Ohio, a region that was shifting from prosperous manufacturing towns to shuttered factories and high unemployment, Kinsella was all too aware of the financial reality women faced. Kinsella told an *LA Times* reporter, "Bottom line is, they want cheap people they can spit out after they chew 'em up." When she wasn't answering the hotline, Kinsella ran a singing telegram service called Red-Hot Mama of the Big Belly Telly "where she belt[ed] out Sophie Tucker songs or parodies of Beatles songs...the songs she [wrote were] often about the labor movement."[15]

The Job Survival Hotline was a huge success. Over the course of one year, 1989-1990, "the hotline received over 60,000 phone calls from every state in the country." 9to5 engaged in public campaigns such as National Boss Context to highlight employers who fell into three categories -- "the good, the bad, and the ugly." Barbara Otto was in her twenties when she left a comfortable job in corporate America to work as 9to5's Director of Programs and Public Affairs. As a first-generation college student, it was a bold move to leave the consistency of a corporate job to work for a small women's organization, but she realized that "all of the secretaries [at her job], some of which had more education that [she did], were making less money than I was because of their role as a secretary or executive assistant."[16] Otto was recruited by Ellen Bravo, an organizer with the Milwaukee 9to5 chapter. She quit her corporate job and moved to Cleveland to work in the national 9to5 office.

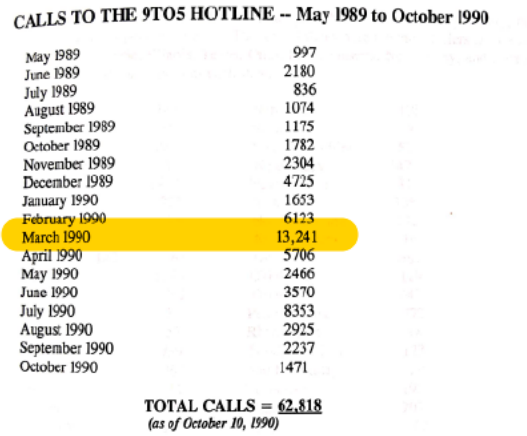
[14] Barbara Otto, Interview with the author, March 3, 2020, Oak Park, Illinois.
[15] LA Times, [find citation]
[16] Barbara Otto, Interview, 2020.

The National Boss Contest became her project. Working with a public relations firm, the contest had three goals. First, 9to5 wanted to raise awareness about what women were experiencing in the workplace beyond conversations about the proverbially glass ceiling. Second, the organization wanted to highlight health and safety issues along with the lack of family and medical leave. And, finally, engaging in a national conversation about the workplace more generally. 9to5 gathered submissions from around the country often through the Job Survival Hotline. "We heard from a lot of women," Otto recalls, "and frankly we got some entries from men, who were in really unsafe workplaces, usually in the South. But also that was the beginning of the wave of video display terminals and…repetitive stress injuries." Otto enlisted celebrity judges who could not believe the "that people still worked like this."[17] The media attention garnered by the contest further promoted the Job Survival Hotline as a critical resource for women workers. The widespread national press in magazines such as *Mademoiselle Ladies Home Journal,* and *Money* jammed up the phone lines.

In addition to the National Boss Contest, 9to5 would use events like International Women's Day (March 8) to draw attention to the Job Survival Hotline.[18] This often resulted in significant surges in calls. For example, in March 1990 the Hotline had more than 13,000 calls to the hotline – an average of 420 calls a day."[19]

[17] Barbara Otto, Interview, 2020.
[18] Otto, Interview 2020.
[19] 9to5, National Association of Working Women, "Business as Usual: Stories from the 9to5 Job Survival Hotline," 1991, 2.

Appendix 1



CALLS TO THE 9TO5 HOTLINE -- May 1989 to October 1990

May 1989	997
June 1989	2180
July 1989	836
August 1989	1074
September 1989	1175
October 1989	1782
November 1989	2304
December 1989	4725
January 1990	1653
February 1990	6123
March 1990	13,241
April 1990	5706
May 1990	2466
June 1990	3570
July 1990	8353
August 1990	2925
September 1990	2237
October 1990	1471

TOTAL CALLS = 62,818
(as of October 10, 1990)

About one third of the calls were related to pregnancy discrimination and concerns, another third were made up of discrimination and sexual harassment related issues.[20] Some excerpts from the calls include these two women's experiences:

> *Margaret is a credit manager for a food distribution company. The general manager is harassing her, telling her, 'If you let me pull off your clothes, wash your face and brush out your hair, then we can talk.' The first step in the company's grievance procedure is to file a complaint with the general manager.*

> *"Sharon worked as the administrative assistant to the vice president of a small firm. The owner's son constantly propositioned her and she turned him down. He called her at home late at night many times; he would also call her into his office and scream at her because she wouldn't go out with him. While she was on vacation, the company left a message on her answering machine saying she was fired."*[21]

After arriving in the office, Kinsella would spend the first part of the morning taking all the calls off the hotline that were received overnight. "She would spend the day calling people

[20] 9to5, National Association of Working Women, "Business as Usual: Stories from the 9to5 Job Survival Hotline," 1991, 2.
[21] 9to5, National Association of Working Women, "Business as Usual: Stories from the 9to5 Job Survival Hotline," 1991, 7.

back, sometimes having to research things, sometimes getting in touch with chapters, or she come in and [say] you would not believe what I just heard…"[22] Kinsella had a massive binder that was divided into various workplace concerns – pregnancy, racial discrimination, firings, sexual harassment, and so on. Callers were given the option to become associate members of the Service Employee International Union District 925 for a small fee. The membership would give them access to reduced fee legal advice through the union, however not union benefits.[23]

9to5 took a very broad approach to getting the word out about the hotline including traditional forms such as newspapers, magazines, and radio and news programming. But they also managed to get the hotline number listed into company newsletters and bulletin boards and in employee washrooms. In some cases, they succeeded in getting it inserted into company paychecks. In 1991, President Bush nominated Clarence Thomas to the US Supreme Court. Anita Hill came forward during the confirmation hearing committee and told her story of sexual harassment by Justice Thomas while she worked for him at the Department of Education and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Hill's testimony transformed women's relationship to their experiences of sexual harassment. As journalist Nina Totenberg recalled, "The hearings ripped open the subject of sexual harassment like some sort of long-festering sore. It oozed over every workplace, creating everything from heated discussions to an avalanche of lawsuits."[24] In two weeks, the hotline received over 2,000 phone calls "mostly from people who had never told anybody about what happened to them." One woman called the hotline to share her story of sexual harassment: Whenever her family was having economic trouble, her husband

[22] Barbara Otto, Interview with the author, March 3, 2020, Oak Park, Illinois.
[23] See Windham for more on the formation of the office workers union, SEIU Local 925 and the subsequent SEIU District 925, that came out of the national association, 9to5. They were two separate organizations however they maintained close ties including leadership such as Karen Nussbaum who worked for both 9to5 as well as the SEIU Local 925 for a number of years before leaving to work in the President Clinton administration..
[24] Anita Miller, ed., *The Complete Transcripts of the Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill Hearings, October 11, 12, 13, 1991,"* (Chicago: Academy Chicago Publishers, 1994), 7.

would complain that she left the job. As she and her husband watched the news coverage of the Hill testimony, she pointed to the TV and "she said that's why I'm not at that job. And he said I'm so sorry. I will never say that again."[25] She had never told her own husband that she experienced sexual harassment at work. Hill's testimony changed women's lives.

After Hill's nationally televised testimony, sexual harassment entered the popular vernacular. It had taken almost two decades for the term to gain traction. Sexual violence in the workplace was not a new phenomenon. In fact, women workers had come to expect it. The term sexual harassment made its public debut in 1975 when journalist Lin Farley testified before the Commission on Human Rights of New York City. A few years later, the term entered the legal lexicon in 1979 with legal scholar Catherine MacKinnon's *Sexual Harassment of Working Women*.[26] But it was the Thomas-Hill fiasco that truly cracked open the silence and the Job Survival Hotline was there to field the calls.

While the Job Survival Hotline was a unique resource for workers, the hotline as a concept was not new. In fact, the telephone has been a critical organizing tool that has continued to evolve over time. The evolution of the telephone has allowed women to engage in private conversations that is "an important social process, serving…to renew networks and communities."[27] While it would not be until the 1960s and 1970s that telephones would be nearly universal in the United States, the telephone served such a significant role that in the 1920s that more households had a telephone than an indoor toilet. General Federation of Women's Clubs president Mary Sherman commented, "Before toilets are installed or washbasins put into

[25] Ellen Bravo, Interview by the author, November 26, 2019, Milwaukee, WI.
[26] Catherine MacKinnon, Sexual Harassment of Working Women: A Case of Sex Discrimination (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).
[27] Claude S. Fischer, "Gender and the Residential Telephone, 1890-1940: Technologies of Sociability," *Sociological Forum* 3:2 (1988), 212.

homes…telephones are connected…because the housewife for generations has sought to escape the monotony rather than the drudgery of her lot."[28] Women quickly began to use the telephone as an organizing tool. During the 1948 meat boycotts in Texas, housewives created a phone tree or "chain" using their social networks as well as the phonebook to broaden and diversify the scope of their boycott. The use of the phone as an organizing tool linked to societal gender roles in which women felt more comfortable talking on the phone.[29]

In the post-Anita Hill era, 9to5 worked use the Job Survival Hotline as an organizing mechanism to engage more callers. "The word is out about sexual harassment because of Anita Hill, and what`s most important is that, for the first time, it is being recognized not as a sexual issue but as an issue of power," said 9to5`s Otto. "It`s not about sex or sexuality, it`s about power."[30] This shift in discussion to one of power was critical for 9to5 to encourage callers to join 9to5 but also to become "reps." 9to5 published an effective report, "Business as Usual," on the work of the hotline to generate publicity but their membership renewals were low. The 9to5 leadership wanted to involve callers by asking them to be trained a "reps" for hotline callers. This would allow Sharon Kinsella to focus on training and fielding calls while volunteer reps would be able to follow up with hotline callers on their issues. The hotline staff helped develop a packet to access callers' interest. Kinsella worked with both hotline rep volunteers as well as members from the union, District 925, to train them in following up on hotline callers.[31] By the

[28] Quoted in Fischer, 216.
[29] For more on the 1948 Texas meat boycotts, see Mark Robbins, "'It's a Texas Custom to Show Fight': The Cultural Politics of Meat Boycotts in Mid-Twentieth Century Texas," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* (forthcoming). Also see, Lana F. Rakow, *Gender on the Line: Women, the Telephone, and Community Life* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992) on the relationship between gender and phone use and Catherine O. Jacquet, *The Injustices of Rape: How Activists Responded to Sexual Violence, 1950-1980* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2019), Chapter 3 for a discussion of the establishment of rape crisis hotlines.
[30] Carol Kleiman, "Then and Now, Sexual Harassment Widespread," *Chicago Tribune,* 12/9/91.
[31] Ellen Bravo, "1990-91 Program/Organizing Report," SL, 9to5 WI, Box 5, Folder Reports Programming Org, 1989-95.

mid-1990s, the hotline was received thousands of calls with regional callers to the 800 line being routed automatically to local chapters in Boston, New York, Milwaukee, Atlanta, and Cincinnati. Overtime, the volunteer reps grew into a more stable Response Team so by 1995 the total number of Response Team members was more than sixty."[32]

By the turn of the twenty-first century, the Job Survival Hotline was no longer a staffed call-in line. Instead, the Hotline now functions as a message system where women workers leave messages and a 9to5 staff member will follow up. 9to5 is still organizing. Their headquarters moved from Cleveland to Atlanta in the 1990s with Georgia and Colorado as two of the most active chapters. While technology has evolved to make the Job Survival Hotline a less effective organizing tool, the pervasiveness of gender discrimination and sexual harassment in the workplace continues to persist.

When it comes to sexual violence, the social norm remains to fall into a "he said, she said" contest. In the US, we most recently witnessed this dynamic in a 24/7 televised sham during the Supreme Court nomination of Brett Kavanagh. Seventeen years after the first televised "he said, she said" debacle - the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas hearings - the national conversation yet again swirled around Dr. Blasey Ford's accusation that Judge Brett Kavaugh sexually assaulted her while they were both attending high school in suburban Washington, DC. Unlike the Hill-Thomas hearings, this was not about workplace sexual harassment, but it was about credibility and who was to be believed. And, while we would like to believe that society has evolved beyond the anthem of "boys will be boys," we have not. Judge Kavanaugh was ultimately appointed to a life-time seat on the Supreme Court next to Justice Clarence Thomas as elected leaders voted along party lines that did not deviate from "he said, she said." In fact,

[32] n.a., 1994/95 Program and Organizing Report," SL, 9to5 WI, Box 5, Folder Reports Programming Org, 1989-95.

society has hardly moved from the "he said, she said" approach to sexual violence whether it occurs in the home, on the campus, in a dark alley, or at work. Women continue to weather public scrutiny and shame when they dare to come forward to report their perpetrator.

Sexual violence in the workplace is not a new phenomenon. In fact, it is such a common occurrence that workers and scholars alike come to expect it. Yet, in relation to the pervasiveness of sexual violence, historians of gender and work have contributed only modestly to the study of the topic. Just as Ava Baron and Joan Scott called on historians to consider gender as "a useful category" worthy of investigation, Baron along with feminist historian Eileen Boris challenge us "to advance a conversation between labor history and a bodily turn" within the study of the working-class arguing that the default historical body is "a white male, represented by bulging biceps and prodigious strength" and, by default, someone who produces goods rather provide services.[33]

[I do not have the final few pages as an important interview I was scheduled to conduct had to be rescheduled for this week. I will be interviewing the current national director of 9to5 to find out more about the recent history of the Job Survival Hotline and the work 9to5 has been doing around sexual harassment.]

[33] Ava Baron and Eileen Boris, "'The Body' as a Useful Category for Working Class History," *Labor: Studies in Working Class History* 4:2 (2007), 23-4; Joan Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," in *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University, 1988), 28-50.