If men would just follow the rules, all would be well

By Lynne Eisinguire

I didn't start out frothing at the mouth every time the subject of sexual harassment was raised. Like most working women, I’ve had to block my share of unwelcome sexual overtures — especially since, as a litigation attorney, I worked mostly with men. Yet, I was usually able to dodge the flares of male sexual aggression. But through my recent work on the subject, and after conducting training sessions with thousands of managers and employees, I’ve begun to realize:

And so, I couldn’t help but notice the July 18 Other Voices column by Debra Benton — not least because that essay was written by a woman, which may give it undeserved credibility with some readers.

Implicit in her argument was the suggestion that women who are sexually harassed "ask for it" by the clothes they wear and the way they behave.

Suggesting to women that they are the problem is a lead to rules like those enforced in the countries that still require women to shroud their bodies and faces in the traditional veil or "chador" (as it's called in Iran) lest a glimpse of stockinged drive men to lose control. Each woman — in some of the hottest places on the planet — conduct their business in long bulky skirts, shawls and veils so that men don't have to take responsibility for their own behavior. All to no effect, as it turns out: These women are also sexually harassed, assaulted and raped despite every effort to avoid provocation.

The truth is, women are subjected to a double standard in the workplace. Women complain to me that if they dress in the masculine mode — dark suits, no make-up, severe, short hair — men make comments about their lack of femininity or question their sexual preference, and the women’s performance reviews are affected accordingly. If, however, they dress in a way that they consider fashionable and feminine, they are accused of being sexually provocative.

If a woman’s clothing is the problem, why did the Department of Defense study conclude that two-thirds of all military women — who wear uniforms as sexy as a nun’s habit — are subjects to sexual harassment? Why did Frances Conley, the respected Stanford neurosurgeon who worked in lab coats or pea-green and sexless surgical gowns, have to resign because of sexual harassment? Why do studies consistently show that from 40-50% of all working women have been harassed? Were they all dressed provocatively? My own experience as a corporate trainee has confirmed that the sexual message of clothing is in the eye of the beholder — and the viewer.

Given what I do, I dress conservatively in a suit. Nevertheless, I receive a lot of interesting feedback. In one training session, I was wearing a suit straight out of John Malloy’s Dress for Success: navy blue with a loose cut. A well-educated male peer in the audience approached my male colleague at a break and asked us to address the issue of "how women cause sexual harassment by the clothing they wear." I had to explain that my "appearance was sexually provocative.

When my colleague recovered from his amazement, he asked the man for examples. The man cited the buttons of my suit and the way I wore my rings.

I had since measured the neckline of this shirt to be 2/3 inches below the bottom of my neck. Short of wearing a dickey, I’m not sure how I could be more discreet.

It would all be funny if it weren't so pathetic. At one point in the training sessions we conduct on sexual harassment, we show a video tape of different scenarios. One of the most controversial involves two men ogling a woman walking down a hall. The pleasant-looking African-American women wears a long dark skirt, a modest blouse and her hair in a bun. After watching this clip, I have had many men argue that the reason the men leered at her was because she was wearing a short skirt. I have to replay the tape to convince them that the skirt length was mid-calf. I have had others suggest that her yellow blouse "is a provocative color.

The biggest flaw in the argument about women "provoking" male behavior is that it assumes that sexual harassment — like rape and other forms of sexual assault — is about sex. It is not. It's about power. Sexual harassment of women who enter previously male-dominated professions is astronomically high, sexual harassment is low in de-