

Four French Women Score Upset Win in Workplace Sexual Harassment Lawsuit By Michael Soon Fah, J.D. Candidate 2019 November 20, 2017

[Earlier this month in Paris](#), four women emerged victorious in a workplace sexual harassment and discrimination suit against employer H. Reinier, a subsidiary of large French cleaning company, [ONET](#). France’s national state-run rail company [SNCF](#) subcontracted with H. Reinier to sanitize its facilities. The plaintiffs cleaned trains in Paris’ Gare du Nord Station.

The women alleged that their team leader subjected them to frequent bullying and lewd acts over multiple years, including groping one of the women as she leaned over to clean a washroom sink. The harassment intensified when the women supported fellow employee, Rachid Lakhal, after he exposed a kickback scheme within the company. Despite repeated complaints to management, the company refused to transfer the employee responsible to another post. Instead, H. Reinier sanctioned the women for complaining about the harassment.

A French labor court heard the women’s claims alongside Lakhal’s whistleblower suit. The court agreed with the plaintiffs and found that H. Reinier failed to implement sufficient measures to protect the women.

The court awarded each of the women 30,000 euros for sexual harassment and discrimination. Lakhal was awarded 100,000 euros, in part for giving testimony that corroborated his co-worker’s claims. The case marks precedent as one of the first times a French court has awarded a whistleblower enhanced recovery for supporting workplace harassment allegations.

The victory against H. Reinier happens to coincide with an ongoing revolution against sexual harassment in France. Following [allegations](#) that Harvey Weinstein sexually harassed various French actresses, French journalist Sandra Muller confessed her own sexual harassment encounter on twitter. She branded the hashtag “balancetonporc” or “expose your pig” and has inspired hundreds of other French women to post their own experiences. The movement has also reignited discussion about some of France’s past political scandals, including [an incident](#) that forced International Monetary Fund Director Dominique Strauss-Kahn to resign.

Attorney for the plaintiffs against H. Reinier acknowledged that winning a workplace sexual harassment suit is a rare victory in France. Scholars and litigators blame the lack of effective laws and enforcement mechanisms. In fact, France only began providing a civil cause of action for workplace sexual harassment in 1992. However, commentators are hopeful that the recent anti-sexual harassment movement will put pressure on French corporations to root out sexual harassment in the workplace.

As of this article, H. Reinier has yet to terminate the employee responsible for the harassment, but plans to implement risk prevention training for all managers and salaried employees. SNCF stated that they agreed with the court’s decision, but do not plan to cut ties with H. Reinier in the near future.