

WORKPLACE SEXUAL HARASSMENT

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Workplace sexual harassment has been around for as long as workplaces themselves, though social and legal recognition of the phenomenon is scarcely a half century old. Public discussion of sexual harassment as a problem emerged in the 1970s, amid rising women’s workforce participation and burgeoning feminist consciousness, and it was only in 1986, in *Meritor Savings Bank v. Vinson*, that the United States Supreme Court established sexual harassment as a form of sex discrimination under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act.

Given recent heightened interest in sexual harassment, it is especially important to review what’s known—and not known—about its prevalence, causes and costs, and policies to reduce it. We take on each of these issues in turn.

Prevalence

Although any worker may be targeted, women are subjected to the most frequent and severe forms of sexual harassment. In 2016, the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) received 6,758 complaints of sexual harassment, representing only a small fraction of those harassed.¹ Survey research finds a much higher prevalence of harassing behaviors, with as many as 85 percent of women reporting behaviors such as unwanted touching, leering, and offensive sexual joking at work.²

The General Social Survey (GSS), asking direct single-item questions, finds that 4 to 7 percent of female workers and about 1 to 3 percent of male workers experience sexual harassment in a given year, indicating much higher rates than the number of EEOC complaints would suggest.³ More generally, about 19 percent of women and 16 percent of men reported some kind of harassment at work over the past five years (including bullying or abuse) in the 2016 GSS. In our study, approximately 33 percent of women and 14 percent of men (see Figure 1) had experienced behavior at work that they defined as sexual harassment (by age 25 to 26).⁴

KEY FINDINGS

- By age 25 to 26, one in three women and one in seven men experience behavior at work that they define as sexual harassment.
- Very few women file lawsuits in response to sexual harassment. But women who experience harassment are 6.5 times more likely than women who are not harassed to change jobs within two years.

Predictors

Women supervisors are significantly more likely than other women to be sexually harassed, a finding that complicates popular narratives of powerful men preying on less powerful women.⁵ Harassers appear to target women in positions of authority because their status challenges traditional gender norms. Men, too, may be harassed for not fitting conventional notions of heterosexual masculinity. Men who espouse egalitarian gender beliefs, for example, are more likely than other men to report harassment.⁶

Age, race, and gender expression are also linked to sexual harassment. Relative to the general population, those who identify as LGBT generally report higher rates of sexual harassment (about 7% per year) and general harassment (about 25% over the past five years in the 2016 General Social Survey). Perceptions of what “counts” as harassment also vary by age, and many workers reinterpret past experiences as they get older.⁷ Adults are more likely than adolescent workers to experience “core markers” of harassment, such as unwanted touching and violations of personal space.⁸ In addition, stereotypes about black women shape both the kind of harassment they experience and others’ responses to their experiences.⁹ As Kimberle Crenshaw pointed out long ago, it is hardly accidental that controversial black entertainers have been received very differently than their controversial white analogues. Research also suggests

that men whose gender expressions are not heteronormative are more likely to report harassment than those who are more stereotypically masculine.¹⁰

Targets of harassment appear to be selected in part because they are least likely to report their experience.¹¹ Indeed, most harassment goes unreported. As shown in Figure 2, we found that nearly one-third of women who experienced unwanted touching and/or multiple harassing behaviors told no one about their experience, and only 3 percent filed a lawsuit. Although the #MeToo movement has almost certainly changed reporting behavior, it is not yet known whether its effects have substantially raised reporting rates for rank-and-file cases as well as high-profile ones.

Costs

Although few women file lawsuits, 80 percent of the harassed women in our study changed jobs within two years, at presumably high cost for workers and employers alike. Women who experience harassment are 6.5 times more likely than women who are not harassed to change jobs.¹² This rate stays roughly the same even after accounting for other factors—such as the birth of a child—that sometimes lead to job change (and might be confounded with harassment).

In addition to changing jobs, many women change industries or reduce their hours after harassment. Sexually harassed women report significantly greater financial stress two years after the harassment than those who are not harassed. In many cases, workers who stand up against harmful environ-

FIGURE 1. Proportion of Workers Who Experienced Sexual Harassment by Age 25–26

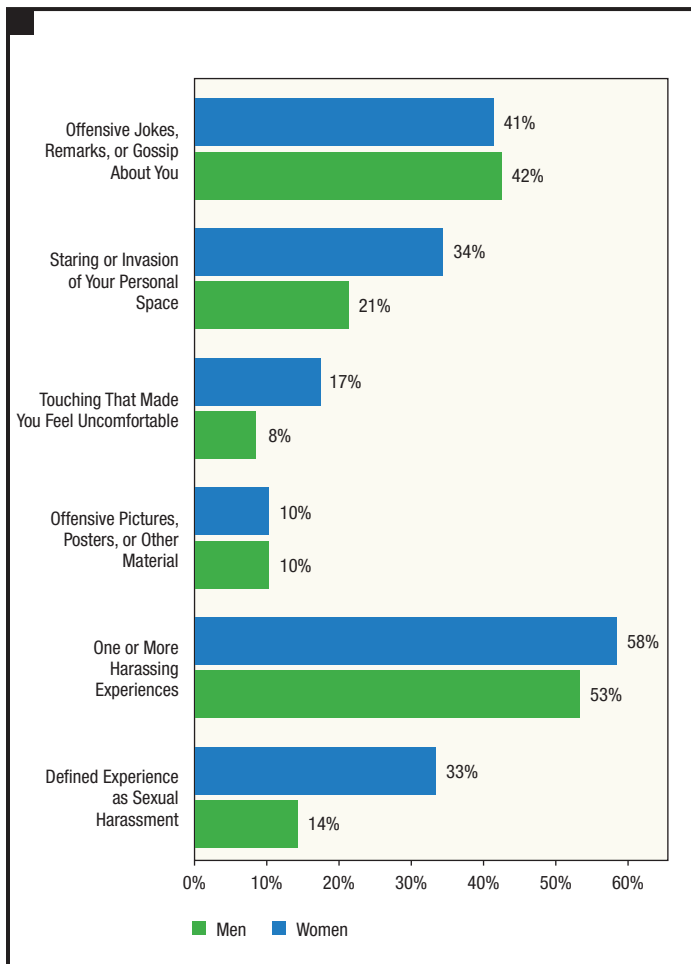
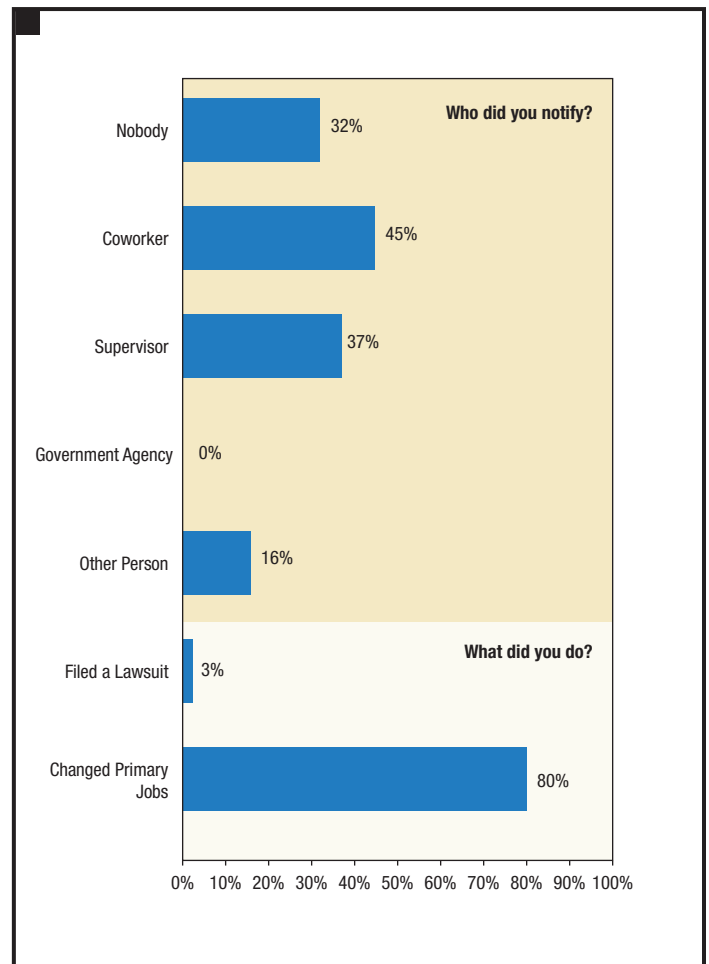


FIGURE 2. Women’s Responses to Severe Sexual Harassment



Source: Mortimer, Jeylan T. Youth Development Study, 1988–2011 [St. Paul, Minnesota]. ICPSR24881-v3. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2015-12-18. <https://doi.org/10.3886/ICPSR24881.v3>.

ments and remain in their jobs also face ostracism and career stagnation, whether they are harassed themselves or acting on behalf of colleagues.

Sexual harassment brings physical and psychological consequences too, including sleep problems, increased risk of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder.¹³ Harassed individuals also report diminished self-esteem, self-confidence, and psychological well-being. These depressive symptoms often persist for many years after harassment has occurred. Effects may also accumulate over time, as early targets are more likely than non-targets to be harassed again later in life.¹⁴

The high costs of sexual harassment extend beyond those who are harassed. Employers face reduced employee job satisfaction and organizational commitment, increased absenteeism and work withdrawal, and deteriorating relationships among coworkers. The EEOC reports that sexual harassment charges filed with them in 2016 cost organizations and harassers \$40.7 million, in addition to monetary damages awarded through litigation.¹⁵

Prevention and Control

When sexual harassment is ignored or pushes women out of the workplace, the organizational cultures that produce it remain unchallenged. Rather than expecting harassed women to leave, better systems for reporting, preventing,

and controlling harassment are needed. Hiring and promoting more women is one proven strategy, as male-dominated environments have been found to foster higher harassment rates.¹⁶ Bystander training may also help by developing a culture in which employees are empowered to promote positive workplace interactions. And serious and repeat harassers must face real sanctions.

The “Silence Breakers” and #MeToo movement of 2017–2018 have brought renewed attention to the issue, but it would be wrong to simply assume that these movements will ultimately be transformative; indeed, previous waves of attention to harassment in 1991 (involving Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill) and 1998 (involving Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky) failed to produce lasting change. The key question is whether a full-throated norm cascade has been engendered and whether, in response to that cascade, organizations will recognize the reputational, personnel, and economic costs of harassment and introduce the wholesale culture changes required to reduce its prevalence.

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NOTES

1. Men filed about one in six of these complaints (16.6%). U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. 2016. "Charges Alleging Sexual Harassment, FY 2010–2016." Retrieved December 28, 2017, from https://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/statistics/enforcement/sexual_harassment_new.cfm.
2. U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. 2016. "Select Task Force on the Study of Harassment in the Workplace."
3. Smith, Tom W., Peter Marsden, Michael Hout, and Jibum Kim. General Social Surveys, 1972–2016 [machine-readable data file]. NORC at the University of Chicago [producer and distributor]. Data accessed from the GSS Data Explorer website at gssdataexplorer.norc.org.
4. Uggen, Christopher, and Amy Blackstone. 2004. "Sexual Harassment as a Gendered Expression of Power." *American Sociological Review* 69(1), 64–92. These data are consistent with 1994–1996 GSS evidence that 41.4 percent of women and 25.6 percent of men had ever found "themselves the object of sexual advances, propositions, or unwanted sexual discussions from coworkers or supervisors. The advances sometimes involve physical contact and sometimes just involve sexual conversations."
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8. Uggen and Blackstone, 2004.
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