When sexual harassment is used to equalise power

The list of powerful men accused of sexual harassment seems to grow longer every day: Roger Ailes, Harvey Weinstein, Steve Wynn, Mario Batali, Matt Lauer, Mario Testino, Richard Branson, Roy Moore, just to name a few. These reports tell a distressingly familiar story of unchecked power that reinforces popular understandings about who engages in sexually harassing behaviour and who is targeted. But the #MeToo movement and social science research complicate this simple narrative. Sexual harassment is experienced by both women and men. It occurs in a wide variety of work settings, from construction sites to classrooms. And while harassers are often supervisors, they are also sometimes subordinates and clients. So, what does the research tell us about these sexual harassment scenarios?

Our 2012 article examines the individual and workplace factors that predict sexual harassment. We start with two competing hypotheses. First, the *vulnerable-victims* hypothesis reflects the typical harasser scenario we see in the news: those with organisational power preying on those in the most precarious positions. Second, the *power threat* model suggests that those who threaten men's dominance will be more frequently targeted. Perhaps surprisingly, the latter hypothesis had received somewhat greater support in earlier studies.

Using longitudinal survey data from the Youth Development Study, we asked people about sexual harassment in three ways: (1) whether they experienced at least one harassing behaviour; (2) how many such behaviours they experienced (ranging from 0 to 4); and, (3) whether they interpreted them as sexual harassment. Participants, who were between 30 and 31 years old at the time, were asked to report on sexual harassment during the past year. Regardless of how harassment was measured, we found support for the power-threat model. Compared to those who did not supervise other workers, women supervisors were 138 per cent more likely to experience a harassing behaviour, they reported a rate of harassment that was 73 per cent greater, and they were nearly 3.5 times as likely to identify their experiences as sexual harassment.

In addition to power-threat, there are other explanations for this finding. For example, women supervisors may be more conscious or aware of anti-discrimination policies and therefore understand their interactions and experiences differently. Yet by every single measure, not just subjective harassment, women supervisors were more likely to be harassed. Our models also included the effects of previous harassment, which helps adjust for stable within-person characteristics that may influence these interpretations. Although men also reported harassment, supervisory status only raised the likelihood of harassment for women. In subsequent research, we found that harassment also raised financial stress for women, but not for men.

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To better understand the scenarios reported in our survey data, we interviewed 14 men and 19 women who had experienced sexual harassment in their early career stage. Our interviews with women supervisors clarified the links between supervisory status and harassment. One common theme was isolation. Holly, for example, worked in manufacturing and was the only woman in upper-management at her firm. While at a company dinner, she was repeatedly groped by a client, the vice president of an influential firm. Holly's colleagues saw the behaviour but they did not confront her harasser. Instead, they pulled her aside and encouraged her to leave early while they stayed for after-dinner drinks at the bar. Holly believes she was targeted because "I was the only girl there. There were no other girls…Directly below our owner, there's not been a woman in any of those positions in eons."

Other women supervisors we interviewed reported harassment and sexist remarks intended to undermine their authority and put them "in their place." Marie, a project manager on a construction site, shared that "being a female in management is difficult, and guys don't like it—especially the guys that work in the field. They think that women should be secretaries." In fact, she was told by one subcontractor that "this isn't the job for a woman." Taken together, the survey and interview data show that workers' relative power is shaped by gender, not just by organisational rank. Sexual harassment is often used as an "equaliser" against women in authority positions. As Quinn observed in her study of "girl watching," sexual harassment "may trump a woman's formal organisational power" by reducing women to sexual objects.

Although our findings relating to supervisory authority were the most robust, we also identified other important predictors of harassment. First, women who worked in industries with a higher percentage of men were more likely to be harassed. Our interview data suggest that certain behaviours—such as telling suggestive stories or inappropriate comments about women's bodies—were interpreted as more menacing or degrading in masculine fields. And women supervisors in industries dominated by men were especially likely to report sexual harassment.

Second, we found evidence that gender expression was linked to harassment for both men and women. Women who rated themselves as *less* feminine, and men who rated themselves as *more* feminine, were more likely to be harassed. Some of the men who we interviewed said that they were targeted by co-workers because they did not act masculine enough. Seth, who rated himself as more feminine than most other men, said that he was targeted as a journalist for not behaving more aggressively, and recalls the owner at a previous restaurant job acting very patronising toward gay men who worked there "as a sort of dominance thing."

In short, we should not allow the fame or circumstances of well-publicised harassers and targets to blind us to the more diverse scenarios of everyday harassment described in the #MeToo moment. Nor should our institutions allow the subject to fall by the wayside, as it did after earlier waves of attention surrounding the Clarence Thomas / Anita Hill hearings (1991) and the Bill Clinton / Monica Lewinsky case (1997-1998). To make lasting change in worker behaviour and workplace policy, researchers must dig beneath the headlines to understand and address sexual harassment in all its forms.

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Notes:

- *This blog post is based on the authors' paper Sexual Harassment, Workplace Authority, and the Paradox of Power, American Sociological Review, 2012*
- *The post gives the views of its authors, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.*
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