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Kaitlyn Sawler

University of New Hampshire

Angel Brady

University of New Hampshire

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Sexual Harassment in Professional Settings Among College Students and Adults

Kaitlyn Sawler and Angel Brady

ABSTRACT

This paper looks at sexual harassment in the workplace, comparing nationwide General Social Survey data, Carsey School of Public Policy New Hampshire data, and the data from our study of UNH Durham students. Sexual harassment is being reported in high numbers across society leading to numerous negative impacts on a person's physical and mental well-being. We hypothesize that participants in our study will experience sexual harassment less than participants in the nation and state-wide studies. We also hypothesized that female participants from our sample will have higher reportings of experiencing sexual harassment than the male participants. Using convenience sampling, participants were asked to take an Omnibus survey. We found that UNH students seem to be facing sexual harassment at higher rates than the other two populations. We also found that for the majority of our questions, males and females reported experiencing or knowing someone who has experienced sexual harassment around the same rates.

INTRODUCTION

Workplace sexual harassment is very prevalent in today's society. Currently, forty percent of women and a little more than ten percent of men nationwide have experienced it at some point in their lives (Smith, Potter, and Stapleton 2019). Another study found that fifty percent of women will be harassed at least once during their academic or work life (Fineran 2002). This leads to lasting impacts on a person's mental and physical well-being, some of which being anxiety, depression, and social isolation (Smith et al. 2019 and Fineran 2002). Sexual

harassment can be defined in many different ways and each person you ask could have a different definition. The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) defined sexual harassment as “unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors and other verbal or physical harassment of a sexual nature. Harassment does not have to be of a sexual nature, however, and can include offensive remarks about a person’s sex” (U.S. EEOC 2019). Women often face sexual harassment at higher rates than men and this paper will look at how that holds up in the nationwide GSS sample, in New Hampshire, and on college campuses (Heubner 2008). We are particularly interested in knowing if being on a college campus increases the likelihood of experiencing sexual harassment for men and/or women and how the University of New Hampshire (UNH) compares to the data found in the literature.

Awareness around sexual harassment has become very prevalent in the United States because people are more willing to speak up since the #MeToo movement has begun. The #MeToo movement originally started in 2006 but became very popular in 2017 after an actress posted on her social media account about her experiences with sexual harassment and assault (Hass 2018). This started a movement of women posting on their social media accounts and speaking at rallies about their own experiences of sexual harassment and assault. As a result, women are reporting sexual harassment more than in past years (Bhattacharyya 2018). The increase in reports has caused many institutions and employers to create new rules and regulations in order to better protect the people around them.

POLICIES

Numerous institutions have created policies to protect people from sexual harassment in the workplace. Sometimes even with the policies, workers are not punished, or rules are never enforced so people learn that they do not need to follow them. Often women face sexual

harassment at higher rates, which can be explained in some situations by sex-role spillover theory. According to this theory, sexual harassment more often occurs for women in places of work where they have the role of caring for or serving others. Jobs like waitressing and nursing are places where there are policies, but sexual harassment happens anyway. Waitresses tend to deal with sexual harassment to not risk losing their job, while nurses tend to deal with it because they mark it as part of the caretaking process (Huebner 2008). When a work environment is not tolerant of sexual harassment, both men and women are less likely to be victims of it (Mueller, De Coster, and Estes 2001). Follow-through of the policies is very important, people need to see actual punishments to be deterred from sexually harassing others. Therefore, although women face harassment at higher rates than men, creating policies to protect everyone and enforcing these policies creates a healthier, safer environment for all employees (Mueller et al. 2001). It is important to note that the enforcement of the policy is what truly makes it effective. People face sexual harassment all over the world and researchers have compiled data tracking the prevalence of this social issue. The National Opinion Research Center collects data from citizens of the United States through a sociological survey called the General Social Survey (GSS).

GSS DATA

Sexual harassment in the workplace is illegal but it still happens regularly. The GSS has a question that asks if the participant had ever experienced any type of sexual harassment in the workplace, either by co-workers or by supervisors. This question was asked in 1994 and 1996 and had 523 and 456 participants, respectively, answer yes they have experienced some sort of sexual harassment in the workplace. There were 801 and 941 participants, respectively, who answered no to the same question (General Social Survey 1994-1996). Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 is a law that prohibits any type of discrimination and it covers two types of

sexual harassment, quid pro quo and a hostile work environment (U.S. EEOC 1964). Quid pro quo is defined as sexual favors for either a better position or a better pay grade or class grade, while a hostile work environment is defined as any type of sexual behavior that makes the workplace a hostile environment (Ménard et al. 2010). Title VII also defines sexual harassment as any behavior between verbal harassment and rape (U.S. EEOC 1964).

In this literature review, we are going to look at sexual harassment in the workplace along with sexual harassment in a professional setting on a college campus. We hypothesize that UNH college-aged students will be exposed to sexual harassment less than older individuals in the GSS. We believe this is the case because older individuals have been in professional environments longer and therefore have had more time to be exposed to sexual harassment.

NH DATA

The Carsey School of Public Policy recently released a brief about sexual harassment in the workplace in New Hampshire. The data used were gathered in the Granite State Poll (GSP) at two times, April and July 2018. The GSP is a survey that randomly calls households state-wide. Their data were representative of New Hampshire and they contacted around 500 households. Compared to the GSS data, NH workers face more sexual harassment in the workplace on average. Fifty-two percent of women and twenty-two percent of men have experienced sexual harassment at work at some point in their lives (Smith et al., 2019). Smith et al. (2019) looked at sexual harassment as a whole and then narrowed it into five categories, all of which women had experienced at a higher rate. Forty percent of women have been stared at, leered at, or ogled at compared to eight percent of men. Smith et al. (2019) found that one-third of women reported that offensive remarks were made to them and one-fourth of women reported that someone touched them or exposed themselves at work.

All of these experiences of sexual harassment lead to higher amounts of work-related consequences. This puts women at a higher disadvantage by experiencing trauma and being uncomfortable at work, which could lead to quitting, being fired, demoted, transferred, etc. The study also found that twenty-seven percent of women and nineteen percent of men experienced anxiety or depression after workplace sexual harassment. Twelve percent of women and eight percent of men underwent financial stress after the experience (Smith et al. 2019). Due to a large number of people in New Hampshire experiencing sexual harassment, it is important to look at smaller parts of a state to see if certain areas, like colleges, face this at higher rates.

COLLEGE DATA

In a study done by Kalof et al. (2001), they found that 40% of women and 28.7% of men in college had experienced some sort of sexual harassment at some point in their college career. Throughout the literature we found that gendered sexual harassment was the most experienced type of sexual harassment (Shepela and Levesque 1998; DeSouza and Fansler 2003; Kalof et al. 2001; and Ménard et al. 2010). Gendered sexual harassment is sexual harassment that involves jokes, staring and stories (Kalof et al. 2001). One study found that “47% of undergraduate women and 36% of men had experienced at least one incident of gendered harassment” (Kalof et al. 2001:289). Due to this data, we hypothesize that female college students at UNH will face more harassment than male students at UNH.

COLLEGE WOMEN

A study by Kalof et al. (2001), found that 30% of female students have experienced some sort of sexual harassment in an educational setting. The researchers also found that 63.8% of the 276 female students experienced a sexually harassing event from a male professor. Since a higher education setting is mostly composed of men, it leaves women to be more vulnerable

which leads to more harassment towards them. Although times are changing, women are usually raised to be trusting of people who are of authority (Kalof et al. 2001). Since the person is in an authoritative position, people are less likely to report that sexual harassment had happened (Kalof et al. 2001). Women who are freshman and sophomores in college tend to be more tolerant of sexual harassment than women who are juniors and older because they may not understand what counts as harassment and assault. Women also may underreport due to belittling their own experience, saying it was only a joke or unintentional. Women are more likely to report sexual harassment than men are, but men are also looked over during research and it is important to look at men as victims of sexual harassment as well (McCabe and Hardman 2005). Until recently, sexual harassment was seen as a woman's issue and most people thought that men did not experience sexual harassment. Since our survey was anonymous men might have been more willing to answer truthfully about their experiences with sexual harassment.

COLLEGE MEN

There have not been many studies done on male college students who have experienced sexual harassment therefore, in the literature there were minimal statistics about males. There are some instances where male students are harassed by female professors, but it is usually in a much lower number when compared to females being harassed by male professors. In a study by Shepela and Levesque (1998), they found that 15% of males had experienced sexual advances whereas 12% of females had experienced sexual advances from faculty, this is the one statistic that was higher for males than it was for females. This is the only study that looked at sexual harassment in men, we did not find another study that replicated this data. The most common reports from men said: "they had experienced "sexist language, humor, comments" to "inappropriate physical contact" from a faculty member" (Shepela and Levesque 1998:600).

Even when a male is sexually harassed, there are many stereotypes from the culture that makes a man feel like he has to downplay the experience. The stereotypes that men face when talking about their experiences with sexual harassment are that they are told not to show emotion and some people think that men can't experience sexual harassment.

In most literature men are talked about as the harassers. When surveyed men did report more harassing behavior than women did, and that men are more likely to harass than women (DeSouza and Fansler 2003). In our society, men are the aggressors and are more dominant, women tend to be seen as nurturers and more submissive. We also grow up teaching children that "boys will be boys" and that boys have to be tough, masculine, and are told that sharing their emotional experiences is weak. These social norms act as an excuse for when men treat others aggressively.

METHODS

We hypothesize that UNH students (men and women) will experience sexual harassment in a professional setting less than the national sample and the New Hampshire sample. The independent variable would be the location (work, professional setting, etc.), and the dependent variable would be experiencing sexual harassment or not. There will be questions asking about different types of sexual harassment experienced at work and on the UNH campus. We also hypothesize that females in our sample will experience sexual harassment more than males in our study. The independent variable would be gender and the dependent variable would be experiencing sexual harassment or not.

A non-probability method, convenience sampling, was used to gather participants. All participants were undergraduate students who attend UNH Durham, our final sample size was eighty-five. Our sample included 62 females (73%), 21 males (25%), and 2 non-binary

individuals (2%). UNH’s gender distribution is 55% females and 45% males, so as you can see in Figure 2 below our sample is not representative of UNH based on gender (U.S. News & World Report. n.d.). The highest frequency of year in school was juniors at 31.77% and the lowest was other at 2.35%. 83.33% of our sample was exclusively heterosexual and the other 16.67% were condensed into non-heterosexual.

Figure 2	Frequency	Percent
Male	21	24.71
Female	62	72.94
Non-binary	2	2.35
Total	85	100.00

Figure 3	Frequency	Percent
First Year	11	12.94
Sophomore	23	27.06
Junior	27	31.77
Senior	22	25.88
Other	2	2.35
Total	85	100.00

Figure 4	Frequency	Percent
Exclusively Heterosexual	70	83.33
Not Heterosexual	14	16.67
Total	84	100.00

We took a quantitative approach and used data from a survey and compared it to the trend study in the GSS and the cross-sectional study done by the Carsey School. Our study was a cross-sectional design in the form of an online survey that was taken by UNH students. The first page of the survey obtained their informed consent by explaining to the participant the process, that they can back out at any time, any potential harm that could occur, and that their information will be kept confidential. Participants were asked questions about experiences with various types of sexual harassment. Some problems we faced were with getting approval from the IRB, this changed our sampling method and the wording of our questions. We had to ask if someone you know, instead of our participants, experienced these forms of harassment to ensure that their experiences stay anonymous.

RESULTS

A chi-square analysis was done to compare the men and women in our sample to see if there was a significant difference between the two groups. To compare the GSS and the Carsey NH samples to our sample, a 95% confidence interval was found. This was used to be 95% confident that our sample was significantly different from one of the other populations. To split this up we will look at our table broken down into three sections.

These two questions above were taken from the GSS in 1996 and were asked in our study (Figure 1.1). There was not a significant difference between males and females' experiences. However, we can be confident that there is a significant difference between the GSS results and our study because our total percentage falls out of the confidence interval range. The UNH students in our sample face these types of sexual harassment at higher rates than the nation.

Figure 1.1: Experience of Sexual Harassment in the Workplace Among UNH, NH, and GSS Respondents

	Males	Females	Total	X ²	Carsey NH	GSS	Confidence Interval
Have you experienced sexual advances, propositions, or unwanted sexual discussions from co-workers or supervisors?	42.86%	64.52%	58.82% (n=85)	8.095 (p=0.088)	-	16.52% (n=2760)	58.82 ±10.63%
Do you know anyone who has been harassed by their superiors or co-workers?	57.14%	56.45%	56.47% (n=85)	7.535 (p=0.110)	-	16.13% (n=1469)	56.47 ±10.63%

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

These four questions above were pulled from the Carsey School data on New Hampshire (Figure 1.2). None of the questions were significantly different for males and females. All of the totals were significantly higher than the NH population totals, showing that the UNH students in our sample face these types of harassment at higher rates than NH residents.

Figure 1.2: Experience of Sexual Harassment in the Workplace Among UNH, NH, and GSS Respondents

	Males	Females	Total	X ²	Carsey NH	GSS	Confidence Interval
Do you know of anyone who has been stared, leered, or ogled at in a sexual way at their place of employment?	61.9%	69.35%	67.07% (n=85)	5.576 (p=0.233)	24% (n=989)	-	67.07 ±10.63%
Do you know of anyone who was a victim of offensive sexual remarks at their place of employment?	47.62%	59.02%	57.14% (n=84)	2.6639 (p=0.616)	23% (n=989)	-	57.14 ±10.69%
Do you know of anyone who has been sexually touched in an unwanted way while they were at their place of employment?	19.05%	30.65%	27.06% (n=85)	3.604 (p=0.462)	16% (n=989)	-	27.06 ±10.63%
Do you know of anyone who has been exposed to sexist materials in an unwanted way at their place of employment?	19.05%	46.77%	40.0% (n=85)	7.000 (p=0.136)	18% (n=989)	-	40 ±10.63%

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

These final two questions asked above were also pulled from the Carsey School data on New Hampshire (Figure 1.3). The first question is 0.004 off from being significant, meaning females in our sample do experience this more, males are at zero percent, but it isn't quite significant. With a larger sample size, this could change. The second question is significant

Figure 1.3: Experience of Sexual Harassment in the Workplace Among UNH, NH, and GSS Respondents

	Males	Females	Total	X ²	Carsey NH	GSS	Confidence Interval
Do you know of anyone who was threatened by retaliation if they did not give a sexual favor to a boss or supervisor at their place of employment?	0.0%	9.68%	8.24% (n=85)	9.313 (p=0.054)	9% (n=989)	-	8.24 ±10.63%
Do you know of anyone who was given a promotion in return for a sexual favor by a boss or supervisor?	0.0%	3.23%	3.53% (n=85)	16.114** (p=0.003)	9% (n=989)	-	3.53 ±10.63%

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

though, meaning females in our study experience this form of sexual harassment at higher rates than males in our study. Both of the totals fall within the confidence interval, meaning our sample is representative of the New Hampshire population.

Overall, one out of eight questions were significantly different by gender in our sample and six out of eight questions were significantly higher compared to the other populations. UNH students seem to be experiencing sexual harassment at higher rates compared to the other populations, which fails to support our hypothesis.

DISCUSSION

Our first hypothesis, that UNH students (men and women) will experience sexual harassment in a professional setting less than the national and New Hampshire sample, was not supported by our data, instead, it showed that UNH students seem to face sexual harassment at higher rates than the other two populations. This could be due to the question asking if someone they knew was sexually harassed, the sample size, resources on campus, or even the overall education our participants had. Our data partially failed to support our second hypothesis that females experienced sexual harassment at higher rates than the males in our study. Only one out of the eight questions were significant, where females experienced a type of sexual harassment more than males. This is most likely due to the questions asking if “someone they know” experienced it. Overall it was shocking to look at our data and see such high rates of exposure to sexual harassment. Our results didn’t match the current literature, again this is most likely due to the small sample size and the amount of sexual harassment education provided on the UNH campus. Our data showing how UNH compares to the two other populations can hopefully help kickstart action to prevent sexual harassment on campus.

We hypothesize that our data is partially different from the GSS data because of different social environments. The #MeToo movement is very prevalent in our society, as a result of people coming out about their own experiences of sexual harassment and assault, society is more aware of what sexual harassment and assault are. In 1996, when the GSS data was last collected on sexual harassment, it was very common to keep your experiences with sexual harassment to yourself and not to tell anyone. Women, and men, were afraid of the repercussions of reporting what happened and that if their harassers found out they reported them, the harassment could worsen. Today, women share their stories on social media and report what happened with the police. Women are more aware of what counts as sexual harassment from hearing other people's stories and from more awareness about the topic.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Data on sexual harassment can be hard to obtain, this subject is sensitive and some people might not be comfortable sharing their experiences. Most of the studies allowed people to back out at any time and not answer questions, this means there could have been a larger impact that can't be seen. Also, due to the numerous definitions for sexual harassment, some people do not know that what they experienced was a form of harassment. Most of the studies in this paper had small sample sizes, so the data should be interpreted carefully. Another thing to note is that men might be even less likely to opening up about sexual harassment than women, so the huge gap in the data we see might not be as large.

The biggest limitation of our research was that we had a very small sample size. We had only 84 people fully participate in our survey. Since the sample size was so small, we are unable to generalize it to the UNH population. The GSS data that we used was from 1996 because that was the last time they asked questions about sexual harassment. Between today and 1996 there is

a big difference in the social environment. In 1996, sexual harassment was a taboo subject to talk about so many people kept the experience of sexual harassment to themselves. Today, we have the Me Too movement in our society making the subject of sexual harassment a topic that can be talked about openly if you wish to do so. While we were doing our research, we came across a study done by the Carsey School. The Carsey School looked at people in New Hampshire who have experienced sexual harassment. We emailed the Carsey School to get the questions that they used to obtain their data, but we never got a response back. Since we did not know what the exact questions they asked were, we had to hypothesize the questions they asked based on a table they created. Since we did not have the exact questions, we are not able to generalize the data to New Hampshire. To get IRB approval on our questions, they would only allow us to ask if “someone you know” had experienced the types of sexual harassment in our questions. Since we worded the questions as “someone you know,” we are unable to know for certain if that person the participant was answering about was a UNH student. As a result, we are not able to generalize this data to UNH. Since we were using an omnibus survey with our class, we had to use convenience sampling, meaning we reached out to our networks and asked them to take the survey. This way of sampling causes bias to be introduced into our survey because we are reaching out to people who are like us. To fully understand this topic and the impact it has, more studies need to be done.

New research should use larger more representative sample groups. New studies could focus more on men and how they are impacted in the workplace differently than women. Offering more studies where people could be truly anonymous would be helpful to receive the most accurate data. Our ideal project would be to have more up to date data to compare to the GSS. Having new data would mean that we could compare the national sample to our sample in

the same social environment. We would like to have a larger, representative sample for our data so we could be able to generalize it to the UNH population. Since sexual harassment is a sensitive topic, we would like to have true anonymity so that participants could answer honestly. For future research, we would like to look at how men are impacted in the workplace and if it is different from women. Most of the research that we looked at briefly talked about men and their experiences with sexual harassment, but we suggest that full studies should be done on the impact of sexual harassment on men. We would also like to look at the impact of socioeconomic status on sexual harassment experience, researching if being in a lower social class makes you experience sexual harassment more or less than someone in a higher social class. The last research we would suggest doing would be researching if minorities experience sexual harassment more than people in the majority population. Overall this research has been informative and interesting, especially since we could compare it to other populations. It is eye-opening to see how prevalent sexual harassment is in our community and the data has made us more passionate to change this.

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