

## Sexual Harassment: A Preliminary Review for the Importance of Gender Status

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## **Sexual Harassment: A Preliminary Review For the Importance of Gender Status**

### **Abstract**

Researchers tend to agree that working in a male-dominated work environment increases a woman's risk of being sexually harassed. Sexual harassment may be caused by one of several factors, including threats to a male's gender status. In addition, recent research by Berdahl (2007b: 434) indicated that a woman's risk of being sexually harassed is increased by working in "male-dominated jobs in male-dominated manufacturing plants" and that those women in that environment with a relatively "masculine" personality were harassed the most. After examining the topic of sexual harassment in general and reviewing some explanations for its occurrence, this paper concludes with several questions suggesting future research tied to the topic of gender status in male-dominated work environments.

## Introduction

As early as 1874, published accounts of sexual harassment in the workplace began to surface. Louisa May Alcott documented unwanted sexual attention from the Reverend Joseph, her employer. Alcott was employed in a domestic occupation and claimed that the sexual harassment, not the physically demanding housework, made the job unbearable. Alcott was able to leave her job, becoming a well-known American author. Her accounts, however, give rise to many questions about sexual harassment. What increases a woman's risk of being sexually harassed? In what types of jobs is sexual harassment most prevalent? Does gender inequality in the workplace lead to increased occurrences of sexual harassment? (Morgan, 2001: 209)

## Statistics

Between 1992 and 1999, reports of sexual harassment in the workplace were steadily increasing. Between 2001 and 2006, however, the number of sexual harassment claims reported to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, EEOC, began to decline. Nonetheless, the numbers are still astonishing. The EEOC received reports of 12,025 cases of sexual harassment in 2006 alone. Approximately 84.6% of these claims were filed by female employees. (EEOC, 2007a; EEOC, 2007b) See Table 1 below, which shows the number of reports filed in Fiscal Years 1992 through 2006, as well as the percentage of claims filed respectively by women and by men (EEOC, 2007a; EEOC, 2007b).

**Table 1:** Reports of Sexual Harassment to the EEOC

<b>Fiscal Year</b>	<b>1992</b>	<b>1993</b>	<b>1994</b>	<b>1995</b>	<b>1996</b>	<b>1997</b>	<b>1998</b>
<b>Reports Received</b>	10,532	11,908	14,420	15,549	15,342	15,889	15,618
<b>% Filed by Females</b>	90.90%	90.90%	90.10%	90.10%	90.00%	88.40%	87.10%
<b>% Filed by Males</b>	9.10%	9.10%	9.90%	9.90%	10.00%	11.60%	12.90%

<b>Fiscal Year</b>	<b>1999</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2001</b>	<b>2002</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2006</b>
<b>Reports Received</b>	15,222	15,836	15,475	14,396	13,566	13,136	12,679	12,025
<b>% Filed by Females</b>	87.90%	86.40%	86.30%	85.10%	85.30%	84.90%	85.70%	84.60%
<b>% Filed by Males</b>	12.10%	13.60%	13.70%	14.90%	14.70%	15.10%	14.30%	15.40%

The EEOC defines sexual harassment as the follows:

Unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature constitute sexual harassment when this conduct explicitly or implicitly affects an individual's employment, unreasonably interferes with an individual's work performance, or creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work environment (EEOC, 2007c).

By 1999, perhaps due to the steady increase in reports of sexual harassment, 97% of the workplaces and educational institutions in the United States had implemented policies that define sexual harassment and clearly prohibit such behaviors. As a result, 84% of employees and students in such institutions became aware of the consequences of violating the policies (Morgan, 2001: 209). Sexual harassment of men does occur; however, the focus of this paper is sexual harassment of women in the workplace.

Despite the increased awareness and precautions, the sexual harassment statistics are still striking. Oregon State University (2007) reports the results of a study by the American Psychological Association, which found that 12.7% of female graduate students have experienced some form of sexual harassment. Likewise, Newman, Jackson, & Baker (2003) found that between 6% and 16% of female public administrative workers experienced some form of unsolicited sexual advances. As many as 24% experienced “requests for sexual favors” while up to 36% experienced offensive physical contact. Another 57% experienced verbal behavior considered to be offensive. In positions within the federal government, 44% of women had experienced “unwanted sexual attention” within two years (Newman, Jackson, & Baker, 2003).

In the field of law enforcement, sexual harassment increasingly is becoming a problem. Within the Los Angeles Police Department, sexual harassment and discrimination against female employees is becoming an issue (Williams & Kleiner, 2001). Similarly, sexual harassment of women within the firefighting profession has become a widespread problem. Rosell, Miller, & Barber (1995) explain that one study indicated that 58.2% of female firefighters have reported sexual harassment in the workplace.

### **Response of Women to Sexual Harassment**

A woman's response to sexual harassment can depend on many factors. For example, a woman who has experienced other forms of violence in the past may be more likely to feel violated at work. Past experiences can include "rape, battering, abuse, and incest" (Morgan, 2001: 216). A woman's values can also dictate how she responds to sexual harassment. A woman with feminist views is more likely to identify unwanted sexual attention as harassment than a woman with more traditional views (Morgan, 2001: 216). The type of relationship between the woman and her harasser can also play a role in how she responds to the harassment. An experience of sexual harassment is likely to be more upsetting and stressful when there is a great power inequality between a woman and her harasser (Morgan, 2001: 216). In addition, the gender and race of the harasser can play a role. A woman who is harassed by an individual of a different sexual orientation or race is likely to be more offended than if the harasser's orientation and race were the same as the woman's (Morgan, 2001: 216). Harassment often involves a difference in the authentic or apparent power of the harasser and the individual being harassed. As a result of the power difference, the individual being harassed generally has few alternatives regarding self-defense and retribution (Berdahl, 2007a).

Many women who have experienced sexual harassment in the workplace chose not to report their experiences. Several reasons form the basis for this choice to keep quiet (Morgan, 2001). First, talking about the experience of being sexual harassed is often viewed as “taboo.” Second, society has taught women to keep information about their harassment private. Many women attribute sexual harassment to a man “just being a guy” or “acting like a man” (Morgan, 2001: 212). Third, when a woman speaks out against sexual harassment in the workplace, her own integrity and rationality are brought into question. Some fear that they will not be believed or that reporting sexual harassment will “do no good” (Morgan, 2001: 218).

Fourth, some women fear job loss or retaliation when deciding whether to report harassment (Morgan, 2001: 216, 218). Specifically, those in blue collar jobs may fear “physical retaliation and intimidation.” In addition, blue collar women may deem “toughness” as a requirement of the job and may be more likely to accept sexual harassment and allow it to go unreported (Blue-collar blues, 1993). Women in blue collar jobs are, therefore, more likely to have less aggressive reactions to sexual harassment (Ragins & Scandura, 1995: 429).

Fifth, embarrassment and shame may lead women to avoid reporting their experience (Oregon State University, 2007). Finally, rather than reporting, some women who have experienced sexual harassment chose to escape or avoid the harassment by switching to a different office or shift. Others chose to quit their jobs completely (Morgan, 2001: 218).

Women who “successfully survive” their experiences with sexual harassment in the workplace are often “empowered” after their ordeals. Many face an increase in self-satisfaction and dignity. Others use the knowledge of the law gained during their reporting process to research future employees, to evaluate and react to their work assessments, and to set better

terms of employment in the future. Lastly, many women are motivated to establish support groups, contribute to the media, coordinate protests, or petition for change (Morgan, 2001: 219).

### **Effects of Sexual Harassment on Women**

As a result of sexual harassment in the workplace, many women, as noted above, quit or change their jobs. This has led to a high job turnover rate for women and “slower career advancement.” Additionally, sexual harassment contributes to the “gender gap in pay” (Morgan, 2001: 212). In fact, women who are promoted are often judged on the way in which they seem capable of resisting or enduring sexual harassment in the workplace (Morgan, 2001: 212). Sexual harassment has also led to an increase in absenteeism in workplaces. An increase in sexual harassment also leads to a decrease in “organizational commitment and productivity” (Malamut & Offermann, 2001).

Sexual harassment has many effects on those who fall prey. Emotional distress is perhaps the most common form of anguish faced by those who have experienced sexual harassment. Approximately 90% of those who request help after harassment report some level of emotional distress. Many also experience anger as a result of the humiliation that accompanies sexual harassment. Sexual harassment can also lead to “depression and self-destructive behavior” as well as social segregation (Morgan, 2001: 217). Sexual harassment can also lead to physical distress and illness. Among the types of physical distress caused by sexual harassment are “nausea, headaches, and exhaustion,” the three most commonly reported. Lastly, sexual harassment in the workplace can lead to feelings of dissatisfaction on the job. Individuals who keep their jobs after being harassed often become apathetic about their labor and discontented with the administration (Morgan, 2001: 217).

### **Categories of Work Environments Based on Gender Ratios**

What leads to increased incidences of sexual harassment in certain professions? One theory is the gender ratio in such professions. Professions can be divided into three categories based on gender ratio: (1) male-dominated, (2) female-dominated, and (3) gender-integrated. Male-dominated work environments include professions in the armed forces, criminology, criminal justice fields (Morgan, 2001: 214) and public office workers such as law enforcement officers, maintenance workers, corrections officers, bus drivers, and managers (Rosell et al., 1995). Male-dominated jobs can be further divided into blue collar jobs and white collar jobs. Blue collar workers include firefighters, police officers (Ragins & Scandura, 1995: 432), and miners (Morgan, 2001: 213). White collar workers include surgeons (Oregon State University, 2007), engineers, and attorneys (Ragins & Scandura, 1995: 432). Female-dominated work environments include clerical jobs and professions within the field of social work (Berdahl, 2007b).

### **Male-Dominated v. Female-Dominated**

Most research indicates that the sexual harassment of women occurs more frequently in male-dominated work environments than in female-dominated work environments (Rosell et al., 1995; McCabe & Hardman, 2005). However, some sources indicate that sexual harassment may be underreported in female-dominated work environments (McCabe & Hardman, 2005). Additionally, other research suggests that there are no substantial reporting differences between male-dominated, female-dominated, and gender-integrated work environments (Sexual Harassment Support [SHS], 2006).

Researchers agree that women are exposed to a higher risk of being sexual harassed in male-dominated environments, such as construction and policing, than in female-dominated environments (Feminist Majority Foundation, 2007). The risk is also higher in occupations that



have conventionally excluded women, such as mining and surgery (Oregon State University, 2007). In addition, the risk of sexual harassment is increased in female-dominated work environments in which women receive low wages and management consists primarily of men (Feminist Majority Foundation, 2007).

Berdahl hypothesized that “women who have characteristics or engage in behavior considered more desirable for men than for women experience more sexual harassment than other women and men” (Berdahl, 2007b: 427). Berdahl performed a study to test this hypothesis. Participants (all women) in the study were first given a “personality gender evaluator,” based on a form of the Bem Sex Role Inventory, in order to determine if the women tended to have a masculine (or feminine) personality. The individuals were then administered a sexual harassment survey. Results showed that a woman with a “highly masculine personality” experienced approximately 1.5 times as much harassment as women with “low masculine personalities” (Berdahl, 2007b: 429).

In a subsequent study, Berdahl administered surveys to both men and women in male-dominated work environments and to both men and women in female-dominated work environments. The male-dominated work environments consisted of manufacturing plants in which employees executed conventionally male-dominated tasks. The female-dominated work environments consisted of community centers in which employees executed conventionally female-dominated tasks such as counseling. Results indicated that women in male-dominated work environments experienced more sexual harassment than did men in male-dominated environments or than did either men or women in female-dominated work environments. Within the male-dominated work environments, women with “relatively masculine personalities” (Berdahl, 2007b: 434) became the targets of the most sexual harassment.

In summary, Berdahl (2007b: 434) found that “the more women deviated from traditional gender roles – by occupying a “man’s” job or having a “masculine” personality – the more they were targeted for sexual harassment” (Berdahl, 2007b: 434). Berdahl’s studies indicate that women who deviate from the feminine prototype are most likely to be the targets of sexual harassment (Berdahl, 2007b: 434).

### **Blue Collar v. White Collar**

Trainees and employees of women in blue collar jobs report more frequent occurrences of unwanted sexual advances than employees in other jobs (Newman et al., 2003). Likewise, sexual harassment is more prevalent in blue collar environments than in white collar environments (Blue-collar blues, 1993; Ragins & Scandura, 1995: 429). Sexual harassment in blue collar jobs is more severe and persistent than that in white collar environments (McCabe & Hardman, 2005).

### **Explanations for Sexual Harassment of Women**

Women face a higher risk of experiencing sexual harassment in jobs where sex is treated as a commodity or “is performed as a service.” For example, some waitresses are expected to wear sexual or enticing uniforms or have been instructed to flirt with their customers. Such waitresses often experience sexual harassment from both their customers and managers. Sexual harassment is also more likely in environments where “economic and sexual power overlap” and in workplaces where “political, economic, and sexual power” unite. As a result, sexual harassment is an expression of the battle between those who possess power (the abusers) and those who seek to reclaim power (the victims) (Morgan, 2001: 220).

Morgan (2001) points to two main risk factors that lead to sexual harassment in the workplace. The first risk factor is simply being a woman. The second is “working or learning in

close proximity to men” (Morgan, 2001: 213). He also indicates that women who work in an environment in which their labor is both controlled and evaluated by men are at a higher risk of experiencing sexual harassment. Similarly, he believes women who have reservations about the superiority of men or who oppose male authority are prone to be labeled as “traitors” and treated as such by way of sexual harassment (Morgan, 2001).

One way that women contest the superiority of men is by gaining “social, economic, or organizational power over them” (Morgan, 2001: 215). By doing so, women become targets of “sexualized hostility,” according to Morgan. In a study by DeCoster, Estse, & Mueller and cited by Morgan (2001: 215), there was a positive relationship found between increased tenure and education and the risk of experiencing sexual harassment. As a woman gains more power, she is seen as more of a threat to those in power. As a result, her risk of being sexually harassed by those in power increases (Morgan, 2001: 215).

Ragins & Scandura (1995: 430-431) describe two explanations for sexual harassment in the workplace. The first one is the sex-role spillover model, which involves extending gender roles into the workplace. For example, female gender roles typically include qualities such as compliance, “nurturance,” and “dependency.” The female gender role can also involve “sexual aspects, such as the view of women as sex objects” (Ragins & Scandura, 1995: 430). Sex-role spillover can lead to sexual harassment in the workplace and can induce a sexualized environment. In addition, women may be more likely to be treated as “sex objects.” Male coworkers may expect women to “accept sexual behaviors or comments.” Studies of the sex-role spillover model found “women in male-typed jobs were more likely to report sexual harassment than women in female-typed or gender-integrated” jobs (Ragins & Scandura, 1995: 431).

The second explanation, the “contact hypothesis,” explains that sexual harassment is a result of contact with persons of the opposite gender. The “contact hypothesis” was used by Gutek, Cohen, & Conrad in their 1990 paper to contrast the sex-role spillover model, as cited by Ragins & Scandura (1995: 431). This alternate hypothesis states that women in male-typed occupations are more likely to experience sexual harassment than women in female-typed or gender-integrated occupations because these women in male-typed occupations have more contact with men. (Ragins & Scandura, 1995: 431).

Berdahl explains that sexual harassment is often viewed as a means of preventing women from entering advantageous careers and ensuring that they remain financially dependent on men (2007a). To a harasser, sexual harassment is more about belittling and repudiating those harassed than about engaging in sexual acts with them. Berdahl (2007a) cites research indicating that men who support male supremacy are more prone to commit acts of sexual harassment than other individuals. Similarly, individuals who oppose male dominance are more likely to be sexually harassed (Berdahl, 2007a).

Berdahl proposes, therefore, that a man’s yearning to exercise dominance over women leads to sexual harassment. She also suggests that the chief cause of sexual harassment is the aspiration to defend one’s social status when it appears to have been threatened. Berdahl argues that “sexual harassment should be viewed as behavior that is based on sex – as behavior that derogates, demeans, or humiliates an individual based on that individual’s sex” (Berdahl, 2007a: 641). Berdahl indicates that a society in which a system of “gender hierarchy” exists can lead individuals to “define and defend social status in terms of sex” (Berdahl, 2007a: 645). All societies assign a higher status to “being male” than to “being female” (Berdahl, 2007a: 645). Consequently, organizations within these societies “tend to mirror” this hierarchy (Berdahl,

2007a: 645). Berdahl (2007a) also suggests that “at one time or another, and to varying degrees of intensity, all individuals are motivated to defend their sex-based status and the benefits it yields when this status seems threatened, and all individuals are capable of doing so by derogating another based on sex” (Berdahl, 2007a: 645).

### **Threats Prompting Defense of Gender-Based Status**

Berdahl points to four threats that can prompt an individual’s desire to defend his or her “sex-based status” (2007a: 646). Three of the four threats call attention to group divisions. The first of these, “acceptance threats,” contest an individual’s standing as an ideal or archetypal constituent of his or her gender. Acceptance threats challenge the masculinity of a man or the femininity of a woman. These threats cause an individual to want to demonstrate the ideal traits of his or her gender group.

The second type of threat is “category threats,” which link “an individual with a sex-based group against his or her will” (Berdahl, 2007a: 647). When an individual is linked to a lower status group, the individual is likely to feel more threatened than if the individual had been associated with a higher status group. Therefore, in most cases, both men and women are likely to feel more threatened when linked to women. Category threats often cause an individual to yearn to distance himself or herself from the group with which he or she has been linked. This desire is most often carried out through actions which demean women, such as crude sexist jokes.

The third type of threat, “derogation threats,” (Berdahl, 2007a: 648) lessens the value of the status of a particular sex group. Members of the group are threatened based on the degree to which they associate with the group. Derogation threats often cause an individual to either support his or her group or to dissociate from the group. This can entail criticizing members of the opposite sex-based group or degrading individuals in one’s own group (Berdahl, 2007a).

The fourth type of threat differs from the first three in that it blurs group divisions since a member of one sex takes on characteristics of the other sex group. These “distinctiveness threats” (Berdahl, 2007a: 647) lead to less obvious distinctions between the male and female gender. Examples of distinctiveness threats include incidences of an individual carrying out functions that are typically associated with the opposite sex. Similarly, when an individual exhibits characteristics generally connected with the opposite gender, a distinctiveness threat is created. Distinctiveness threats may account for the prevalence of sexual harassment in male-dominated work environments (Berdahl, 2007a). Berdahl’s study (2007b) showed that women in these work environments are more likely to experience sexual harassment than other women. Distinctiveness threats are also consistent with the frequency of sexual harassment of women in these environments who display more traditionally male characteristics (Berdahl, 2007b).

Berdahl (2007a) suggests that those who create a threat to the status of the harasser are likely to be harassed in an effort to suppress the threat. Specifically, individuals who threaten men’s status are likely to be sexually harassed. When a man wants to defend or increase his status when compared to that of a woman, he is likely to accomplish this by demeaning her, specifically in male-dominated work environments. When a man “sexually objectifies or dominates” (Berdahl, 2007a: 649) a woman, he may boost his feeling of masculinity by heterosexually dominating a woman (Berdahl, 2007a).

Other actions may increase an individual’s risk of being sexually harassed according to Berdahl (2007a). Individuals who reduce distinctions between genders (distinctiveness threat) are also likely targets of sexual harassment. Similarly, individuals who dispute another’s possession of sex-based traits (acceptance threat) or who classify another in a gender-based group against his or her will (category threat) are likely to be harassed. In addition, individuals

who question the value of a sex-based group (derogation threat) increase their likelihood of becoming a target of sexual harassment. Lastly, those who possess less power than the harasser are prone to experiencing sexual harassment (Berdahl, 2007a).

### **Conclusions and Implications for Further Research**

To begin, I wonder whether or not the sexual harassment of women by men results from a threat to men's sense of supremacy. Berdahl (2007a) suggests that women who threaten the status of men experience an increased risk of being sexually harassed. Berdahl also believes that "the primary motive underlying all forms of harassment is the desire to protect or enhance social status when it seems threatened" (2007a: 645). Berdahl also indicates that societies attribute higher status to "being male" than to "being female" (2007a: 645).

**Research Question 1:** Does the sexual harassment of women by men in male-dominated work environments result from a threat to men's sense of supremacy?

The threat to men's sense of supremacy can occur in two ways. First, men's sense of supremacy is threatened when women work in male-dominated work environments. Morgan (2001: 213) supports the conclusion that working "in close proximity to men" increases a woman's risk of being sexually harassed. Berdahl's (2007b) third study also indicated that women who work in a male-dominated work environment experience an increased risk of being sexually harassed (Berdahl, 2007b). Some research, however, suggests that there are no substantial reporting differences between male-dominated, female-dominated, and gender-integrated work environments (Sexual Harassment Support, 2006). Thus, there is still some question whether working in a male-dominated work environment increases a woman's chance of being sexually harassed. I wonder whether an increase in risk is caused by increased contact with men, as suggested by the contact hypothesis (Ragins & Scandura, 1995: 431). Women who

work in male-dominated work environments come in contact with more men than do women who work in female-dominated work environments or gender-integrated work environments. Therefore, I wonder whether women in male-dominated work environments are more likely to pose a threat to men's sense of supremacy than women in female-dominated or gender-integrated work environments.

**Research Question 2:** Do women who work in a male-dominated work environment experience an increased risk of being sexually harassed when compared to women in female-dominated or gender-integrated work environments? If so, is this increased risk a result of increased contact with males?

The threat to men's sense of supremacy can also occur when a woman has a relatively "masculine" personality. Berdahl (2007b) indicates that a woman with a relatively "masculine" personality experiences an increased risk of being sexually harassed in a male-dominated work environment. She admits, however, that "larger sample sizes" would have been more valuable (2007b: 435). She advises that her results should "be viewed as preliminary" (2007b: 435). If possessing a relatively "masculine" personality does in fact increase a woman's risk of being sexually harassed, does this increased risk result from the creation of a distinctiveness threat? Recall, when an individual exhibits characteristics generally connected with the opposite gender, a distinctiveness threat is created (Berdahl, 2007a). When a woman displays relatively "masculine" traits, she is blurring the distinction between the male and female sexes. This poses a distinctiveness threat, using Berdahl's terminology (2007a). I also wonder whether women with relatively "masculine" personalities can indirectly lead to the creation of an acceptance threat, thereby increasing her risk of being sexually harassed. In other words, do men experience pressure from their male coworkers to "prove their masculinity" (Berdahl, 2007a: 648) by harassing a woman with a relatively "masculine personality?"



**Research Question 3:** Do women who have relatively “masculine” personalities experience an increased risk of being sexually harassed in male-dominated work environments? If so, is this attributable to the creation of a distinctiveness threat or an acceptance threat?

My research has raised additional questions related to the sexual harassment of women in male-dominated work environments. Further investigation and studies are needed to test variables that may increase a woman’s risk of being sexually harassed. Becoming aware of factors that increase the risk of sexual harassment in the workplace may help to eventually minimize occurrences of such.

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