

PB21 - How to tackle sexual harassment in Research and research organisations

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This policy brief provides evidence-based, concrete recommendations for national level policy makers and institutional science leaders on how to tackle sexual harassment in research performing organisations (RPOs) and research funding organisations (RFOs).

Why is this important?

Making sexual harassment, and indeed gender harassment visible as an obstacle to women's participation and progression in science is both difficult yet necessary given the attrition rates of women in science and the violation of human rights experienced by a substantial number of female scientists.

Research has demonstrated that women scientists who experience more sexual harassment and gender discrimination reported poorer job outcomes.¹ It has also been linked to lower workplace productivity, lower job satisfaction, as well as to negative physical and psychological health consequences.²

What is the extent of the problem?

The European Union Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) defines sexual harassment as multidimensional:

“ranging from physical forms (unwelcome touching, hugging or kissing) through to verbal acts (offensive sexually suggestive comments or jokes) and non-verbal forms such as cyberharassment (unwanted, offensive sexually explicit emails or SMS messages, or offensive, inappropriate advances on social networking sites)”²

Sexual harassment is particularly insidious given the difficulties in researching its prevalence. Workplace sexual harassment has been documented as pervasive and under-reported.²

Whilst international survey data demonstrate that the majority of victims are women of sexual harassment, men and people with further gender identities, such as transgender and non-binary, are also subject to sexual harassment. Moreover, harassment can be directed to sex, gender, sexuality and/or gender identity, and can interlink with other dimensions of harassment, such as harassment related to age, class, (dis)ability, race and/or ethnicity. In the remainder of this policy brief, when the term sexual harassment is used, it refers to all the points above in this paragraph.

Victims of harassment tend to be younger, occupy lower position jobs, work with and be supervised by men – whilst female victims tend to work in male-dominated occupations. Perpetrators tend to be male and higher up the occupational ladder than their victims.²

Research has identified certain organisational characteristics that are more conducive to an environment where sexual harassment is prevalent which include: degree of tolerance of sexual harassment, gender composition of the workplace, including sex of the supervisor, if an occupation is considered traditionally male and a hierarchical structure defined by great power differentiations.²

Given the well-documented gendered power dynamics at play in science: a male-dominated workplace culture, advancement facilitated by an ‘old-boys’ network, the organisation of work characterised by vertical segregation and often based on a supervisor relationship, sexual harassment in the science sector is a pernicious problem that needs to be tackled.

What are the options?

Legislation varies by country and includes protection against workplace sexual harassment under both civil and criminal law.²³ Ministries and national bodies can initiate various measures like researching its prevalence and awareness raising. There is also much to be done at the institutional level, such as like establishing complaints procedures and monitoring experiences. The European GENDER-NET project reports that participating institutions are carrying out a wide-range of anti-harassment measures including:

- regulations and disciplinary measures;
- policy interventions;
- designing and implementing procedures for improving the reporting of incidents in a safe and confidential setting;
- raising awareness about violence;
- training courses.⁴

In Norway the Gender Equality Act in 2002 included a provision that stipulates that the management of educational institutions must prevent and try to preclude sexual harassment – this is followed up by the Equality and Anti-discrimination Ombud.⁵

In Sweden the Equality Ombudsman has the authority to refer cases to the Swedish Labour Court as well as mediating between the parties in order to either secure an apology or financial compensation.⁶

In France a law on sexual harassment was passed in 2012 which stipulated that employers prevent harassment and that they act on harassment in the workplace. The French Ministry for Higher Education and Research has initiated various anti-harassment measures including raising awareness of legislation in the higher education and research sector as well as carrying out research on the prevalence.⁷

Very many universities have policies and procedures on sexual harassment; some have policies and procedures on bullying; and less have policies and procedures on violence.

The University of Helsinki, the leading university in Finland, began to pay attention to and monitoring sexual harassment in the mid-1990s, as part of its equality activities, leading on to issuing guidelines on prevention of inappropriate treatment and harassment, as part of its equality activities.⁸ In 2014, the University terminated the employment of a very high-performing professor due to sexual harassment and inappropriate behaviour, citing in public that the University applies zero tolerance for this kind of behaviour.⁹

The University of la Laguna (ULL) includes sexual harassment in the Gender Equality Plan (2014-2017). “Improving the prevention and elimination of different kinds of harassment, sexist attitudes, discriminatory treatment based on sex, gender or sexual orientation, and any other gender-based violence” is one of its areas of intervention – and so it subsequently details corresponding measures, indicators and the evaluation process.¹⁰

The Norwegian University of Science and Technology, (NTNU) has also defined sexual harassment in its Action Plan. It stipulates that the manager is responsible for stopping the harassment whilst it details the support and advice services that can be accessed at the University.¹¹

Universities UK established an inter-institutional taskforce in November 2015 to examine violence against women, harassment and hate crime that affects students. Violence against women and sexual harassment is a priority area. The taskforce will bring together students university experts and external organisations to examine the evidence, what universities are currently doing to tackle these issues and what needs to be done. Principles, guidance and recommendations will be developed for the sector.¹²

Oxford University in the UK offers sexual consent workshops – in course induction programmes.

Recommendations

National level policy makers:

- Improve national legislation on sexual and other forms of harassment to cover higher education and research sector.
- Raise awareness of legislation tackling sexual harassment including legislation in the higher education and research sector.
- Provide funding for training of science and human resource managers – to inform institutional policies and procedures for tackling sexual harassment.
- Provide funding for support services - which can inform and signpost victims about the implications of reporting, counselling services etc.
- Develop policies directed at increasing reporting help to support law enforcement.¹³

Institutional Science Leaders:

- Demonstrate and make visible a ‘no tolerance’ of sexual harassment approach.
- Raise awareness and make visible the presence of hostile work behaviours, discrimination, harassment, bullying and violence.¹⁴
- Encourage those experiencing harassment to report it- whilst guaranteeing a safe environment.¹⁵
- Develop an anti-harassment policy to outline inappropriate behaviour and provide a mechanism for people to report violations.¹⁶
- Ensure that the institution has appropriate procedures and processes in place including independent reporting and enforcement mechanisms.¹⁷
- Introduce sexual consent workshops as part of course induction programmes- to inform about statistics on rape, sexual assault and sexual harassment, discuss ‘consent’ and offer information on support services.
- Collect data systematically and monitor and make public collected data.¹⁸
- Train staff and research leaders to deal with sexual harassment procedures and available support services.

Further Reading

Hersch, J. (2015) Sexual harassment in the workplace, IZA World of Labour, 188, pp. 1-10. Available at: <http://bit.ly/29HTdJP>

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European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, (2014). Violence against women: an EU-wide survey: Results at a glance, Luxembourg, Publications Office of the European Union. Available at: <http://bit.ly/15o63p1>

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- [2] Hersch, J. (2015) *Sexual harassment in the workplace*, IZA World of Labour, 188, pp. 5 & 9.
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http://ec.europa.eu/justice/gender-equality/files/your_rights/final_harassement_en.pdf

- [4] Gender-Net, (2015c). *Analysis Report: Plans and initiatives in selected research institutions aiming to stimulate gender equality and enact structural change*, p 50.
- [5] <http://eng.kifinfo.no/c91756/nyhet/vis.html?tid=81681>
- [6] <http://eng.kifinfo.no/c91756/nyhet/vis.html?tid=81681>
- [7] Gender-Net, (2015b). *Analysis Report: National plans and initiatives promoting gender equality and structural change*, p43.
- [8] http://www.helsinki.fi/henkos/tasa-arvo/prevention_of_inappropriate_treatment.htm
- [9] T. Karjalainen, *Iltasanomat* newspaper 29.9.2014; S. Reinboth, *Helsingin Sanomat* newspaper, 20.9.2014
- [10] Ibid.
- [11] Gender-Net, (2015c). *Analysis Report: Plans and initiatives in selected research institutions aiming to stimulate gender equality and enact structural change*, p 50.
- [12] <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/aboutus/whatwedo/PolicyAnalysis/StudentsTeachingSociety/TaskforceViolenceAgainstWomen/Pages/default.aspx>
- [13] Hersch, J. (2015) *Sexual harassment in the workplace*, IZA World of Labour, 188, p9.
- [14] Clancy, K., Nelson, R., Rutherford, J., & Hinde, K. (2014). *Survey of Academic Field Experiences (SAFE): Trainees Report Harassment and Assault*, PLOS ONE, Vol. 9, Issue 7, p8.
- [15] FRA, European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, (2014). *Violence against women: an EU-wide survey: Results at a glance*, Luxembourg, Publications Office of the European Union, p12.
- [16] <http://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2016/01/gender-discrimination-astronomy/422817/>
- [17] Clancy, K., Nelson, R., Rutherford, J., & Hinde, K. (2014). *Survey of Academic Field Experiences (SAFE): Trainees Report Harassment and Assault*, PLOS ONE, Vol. 9, Issue 7, p8.
- [18] Gender-Net, (2015c). *Analysis Report: Plans and initiatives in selected research institutions aiming to stimulate gender equality and enact structural change*, p 50.