

Men are targets of sexual harassment at work far more commonly than we assume

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More than one in ten complaints of sexual harassment at work are reported by men. In a [recent study](#), I found that the majority of cases (78.4 per cent) were female complaints against males. However, women were accused of sexually harassing men in 5 per cent of cases and men accused other men in 11 per cent of cases.

The study analysed sexual harassment complaints lodged with Australian equal opportunity commissions in a six-month period, aiming to understand how and why less visible manifestations of workplace sexual harassment occur.

The study revealed the nature of the complaints, the relative proportion of such complaints compared to the more typical male on female harassment, and what workplaces might need to consider in relation to these atypical but not inconsequential forms of gender inequality.

Men were overwhelmingly responsible for sexual harassment against women in the workplace, but men were also the targets of sexual harassment far more commonly than typically assumed by researchers or the community at large. The study shines a light on these less typical manifestations, including sexual harassment by men of other men and by women of men or other women. These forms of sexual harassment are often less visible and may be less understood.

The majority of complaints in all four groups were lodged against alleged harassers employed in a more senior position. This was particularly noticeable in female-to-female complaints, where nine in ten complaints were made by subordinates against supervisors.

Previous research has shown that in certain contexts women may be encouraged to perform as 'honorary men', adopting sexualised banter to maintain authority and 'fit in' with the dominant male gender culture. This was clearly illustrated in the female-to-female complaints in the study.

Male-to-male complaints often included homosexual slurs and the questioning of men's sexuality. Men who were

gay, perceived to be gay, or who displayed stereotypically feminine qualities were at greater risk of being targeted. An explanation for male-to-male sexual harassment is related to a power-sex association. This is where male harassers, who would usually prey upon vulnerable women because it arouses their power concept, may resort to the harassment of vulnerable males in order to activate power.

The complaints across categories were characterised by a wide range of intimidating, offensive physical and non-physical conduct in a variety of workplaces; not only male dominated ones. For example, a male complainant alleged his female manager asked him to lift his shirt and show her his muscles as well as shouting at him and humiliating him in front of co-workers.

Another man, working as a machinery operator, alleged his male co-worker called him “princess”, told him to “toughen up” and “get a tiara” and that he would rape him.

The most frequent form of physical harassment reported by 40 per cent of the male-to-female group and around one third of the female-to-female group was unwelcome touching, hugging, cornering or kissing.

The study showed that regardless of the sex of the complainant or alleged harasser, sexual harassment causes significant psychological and workplace damage and that it is under-reported compared to its prevalence in workplaces.

The conclusions of the study suggest that sexual harassment functions as a form of patrolling gender borders of the particular norm of masculinity that dominates in a particular workplace. Norms of masculinity can operate quite differently depending on whether the workplace is, for example, a construction site, a police station or a boardroom.

The results also point to the importance of developing supportive complaints mechanisms in workplaces, including for men, who may find about it more difficult to report sexual harassment.

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Notes:

- *This post is based on the author’s paper [Workplace sexual harassment at the margins](#), co-authored with Sara Charlesworth, in *Work, Employment and Society*, April 17, 2015 0950017014564615*
- *The post gives the views of its author, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.*
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Paula McDonald is Professor of Work and Organisation in the Business School at the Queensland University of Technology. From 2010-2012, Paula led an Australian Research Council Discovery project which examined organisational and institutional responses to workplace sexual harassment and its impacts on targets. She has published over 20 journal articles, book chapters and reports on sexual harassment and gendered forms of discrimination.



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