

Women experience more sexual harassment in work groups with male, female balance

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Despite common assumptions, new research suggests that women are not more likely to be sexually harassed when they are the minority or majority in a work group. Instead, researchers found that in most cases, women were sexually harassed at work when their work group had a similar proportion of males and females.

A study looking at 110 work groups from around the world found that women who work in relatively equally matched gender groups were more likely to be harassed than women who worked in predominantly male or female groups. Women in these situations were more likely to experience taunting, patronizing, and predatory behaviors.

"Some people argue that women are more likely to be harassed when there are just a few women, and other people argue that women are harassed when they are the dominant group in an occupation. But we found that actually was not the case. Most sexual harassment occurs in situations in equally mixed gender groups," said Randy Hodson, co-author of the study and professor of sociology at Ohio State University.

Hodson said the logic behind the finding is simple: sexual harassment occurs where there is more opportunity.

"There is a lot more opportunity in these groups because you have a lot of men who have contact on a regular basis with a lot of women, and that's going to create more opportunities for sexual harassment. When women are less represented or when they are mainly working with other

women, there is simply not as much opportunity," he said.

Hodson and other researchers did a detailed analysis of book-length studies examining workplace culture from an array of industries, such as manufacturing, skilled trades, finance, and public administration. All of the books included detailed observations of worker interactions taken by researchers who were immersed into an organization for at least six months.

They then coded the information from the books to measure the type and severity of sexual harassment, ranging from the least severe (patronizing) to the most severe (predatory). The researchers only coded explicit examples of sexual harassment from the books, such as sexual advances or condescending comments made by supervisors or colleagues referring to women as delicate.

Workplaces ranging from less than 50 employees to more than 5,000 employees were included to more accurately represent the general workforce. The results were published recently in the journal *Work and Occupations*.

More than one third of the work groups studied did not have any incidents of sexual harassment. But when sexual harassment was observed, it was found more often in groups with a nearly equal mixture of men and women than in groups with a lone female in a predominately male environment.

"In our research, we saw example after example of situations where women were harassed most often in groups with an equal gender composition," said Lindsey Joyce Chamberlain, co-author of the study and doctoral student in sociology at Ohio State.

While sexual harassment was most likely in equally mixed gender

groups, sexual harassment was also present in groups with a wide range of female representation. Work groups that were predominantly female were protected from the most extreme forms of sexual harassment, but women in these groups were more likely to be targeted through patronizing behaviors.

The study found that the characteristics of a person's job also influenced the likelihood and type of harassment. While increased job security was effective in combating the worst forms of sexual harassment, other factors were less effective.

Women who had more autonomy, for example, were more likely to be the victim of every type of sexual harassment. More power in some organizations led to women being taunted, but it also opened the door for sexual solicitation, threats, and forced sexual contact. This finding in particular was completely unexpected, Chamberlain said.

"We thought more power, for women especially, would protect them from certain types of harassment. But we many women that were harassed because they were in positions with power. Women who have jobs with higher autonomy may be seen as threats to men in organizations that have been traditionally been male dominated," she said.

Compounding the issue, formal grievance procedures were also less effective in combating the less severe forms of sexual harassment. Women were well protected from predation, but company policies often left them less protected from taunting and patronizing from male coworkers.

Hodson said most organizational policies are clearly defined to protect workers from the most extreme behaviors including sexual solicitation, forced sexual contact, and threats. But many of the other, less severe

forms of sexual harassment may be left out or less clearly defined, creating uncertainty among some workers on what can be considered sexual harassment.

Source: Ohio State University

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