Female supervisors more susceptible to workplace sexual harassment

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Women who hold supervisory positions are more likely to be sexually harassed at work, according to the first-ever, large-scale longitudinal study to examine workplace power, gender and sexual harassment.

The study, which will be presented at the 104th annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, reveals that nearly fifty percent of women supervisors, but only one-third of women who do not supervise others, reported sexual harassment in the workplace. In more conservative models with stringent statistical controls, women supervisors were 137 percent more likely to be sexually harassed than women who did not hold managerial roles. While supervisory status increased the likelihood of harassment among women, it did not significantly impact the likelihood for men.

"This study provides the strongest evidence to date supporting the theory that sexual harassment is less about sexual desire than about control and domination," said Heather McLaughlin, a sociologist at the University of Minnesota and the study's primary investigator. "Male co-workers, clients and supervisors seem to be using harassment as an equalizer against women in power."

McLaughlin and her co-authors examined data from the 2003 and 2004 waves of the Youth Development Study (YDS), a prospective study of adolescents that began in 1988 with a sample of 1,010 ninth graders in the St. Paul, Minnesota, public school district and has continued near annually since. Respondents were approximately 29 and 30 years old.
during the 2003 and 2004 waves. The analysis was supplemented with in-depth interviews with a subset of the YDS survey respondents.

The sociologists found that, in addition to workplace power, gender expression was a strong predictor of workplace harassment. Men who reported higher levels of femininity were more likely to have experienced harassment than less feminine men. More feminine men were at a greater risk of experiencing more severe or multiple forms of sexual harassment (as were female supervisors).

In a separate analysis examining perceived and self-reported sexual orientation, study respondents who reported being labeled as non-heterosexual by others or who self-identified as non-heterosexual (gay, lesbian, bisexual, unsure, other) were nearly twice as likely to experience harassment.

Researchers also found that those who reported harassment in the first year (2003) were 6.5 times more likely to experience harassment in the following year. The most common scenario reported by survey respondents involved male harassers and female targets, while males harassing other males was the second most frequent situation.

Source: American Sociological Association (news : web)

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