

# Study finds link between women in power, sexual harassment

August 2 2012

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Women who break the glass ceiling of professional advancement also face increased incidence of sexual harassment from coworkers and subordinates, according to new research by sociologists at the University of Maine and University of Minnesota.

Traditional characterizations of [workplace harassment](#) typically portray male supervisors harassing female subordinates, but “power-threat” theories suggest that women in authority may be more frequent targets.

In spite of progressive legal and organizational responses to sexual harassment over the past few decades, the cultural image of harassers and targets hasn’t kept pace with changing workplace realities, according to UMaine sociologist Amy Blackstone and her research colleagues. The study offers “the strongest evidence to date on the interaction of sex, gender and power in predicting sexual harassment,” say Blackstone,

UMaine alumna Heather McLaughlin, now a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Minnesota, and Christopher Uggen, a University of Minnesota sociology professor.

The research analyzed data from the longitudinal Youth Development Study started in 1988 in Minnesota with more than 1,000 St. Paul ninth-graders. Researchers interviewed 33 of the study participants in 2002 and 2003, when they were in their late 20s, to test their hypotheses and delineate why and how supervisory authority, gender nonconformity and workplace sex ratios affect harassment. “Sexual harassment can serve as an equalizer against women in power, motivated more by control and domination than by sexual desire,” say the researchers, whose findings will be published in August in the journal *American Sociological Review*. “Interviews point to social isolation as a mechanism linking harassment to gender nonconformity and women’s authority, particularly in male-dominated work settings.”

The study found some consistencies: 58 percent of female supervisors in predominantly male work environments are likely to experience harassment, while 42 percent might expect harassment in female dominated workplaces.

“Women supervisors who hold authority over some men directly challenge the presumptive superiority of men,” the researchers write. “When women are able to crack the [glass ceiling](#) and attain leadership positions, stereotypical gender beliefs about their ‘natural’ abilities continue to shape perceptions of their job performance.”

Whereas men in traditionally female occupations can be rewarded for their advancement to leadership, women advancing in male-dominated environments can be isolated and seen as undeserving of their positions, the researchers found.

The study also revealed more varied incidents of [sexual harassment](#) of

female supervisors than occur in a “typical harassment scenario” involving a male boss and a female subordinate, although staring, leering and unwelcome touching were the most common offenses.

Provided by University of Maine

Citation: Study finds link between women in power, sexual harassment (2012, August 2)  
retrieved 26 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-08-link-women-power-sexual.html>

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