

Study: Harassment and discrimination among faculty and researchers in Canada's postsecondary institutions

Released at 8:30 a.m. Eastern time in *The Daily*, Friday, July 16, 2021

Results from a new study on harassment and discrimination among postsecondary academic faculty and researchers show that one-third (34%) of women survey participants experienced harassment in the previous 12 months. This was higher than the rate (22%) reported by men survey participants.

While this gender difference exists in other workplaces, the risk is magnified in the postsecondary setting, where rates among both women and men who were targeted are higher than those reported in [most other occupational settings](#).

The new study "[Harassment and discrimination among faculty and researchers in Canada's postsecondary institutions](#)" represents the first national look at workplace harassment across postsecondary institutions, shedding light on the prevalence and nature of harassment in Canada's colleges and universities.

In this study, harassment refers to verbal abuse, humiliating behaviour, threats (e.g., blackmailing, threats to career or reputation, physical threats), physical violence, and unwanted sexual attention or sexual harassment.

The study is based on data from the 2019 Survey of Postsecondary Faculty and Researchers. The results are representative of survey participants, of which approximately half were university faculty (49%), one-third college faculty (29%) and one-fifth doctoral students (18%). The remaining 4% were postdoctoral fellows.

While the results predate the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to online work and teaching, they provide a unique understanding of the groups most vulnerable to acts of harassment as well as a baseline for assessing trends in harassment within this occupational setting. It is important to note that the prevalence and nature of harassment may have changed since the data were first collected.

Humiliating behaviour the most common form of harassment

Humiliating behaviour was the most common type of workplace harassment within colleges and universities, experienced by 22% of women respondents and 14% of men respondents. This was followed by verbal abuse, with 20% of women and 13% of men stating that they were targets of this type of behaviour.

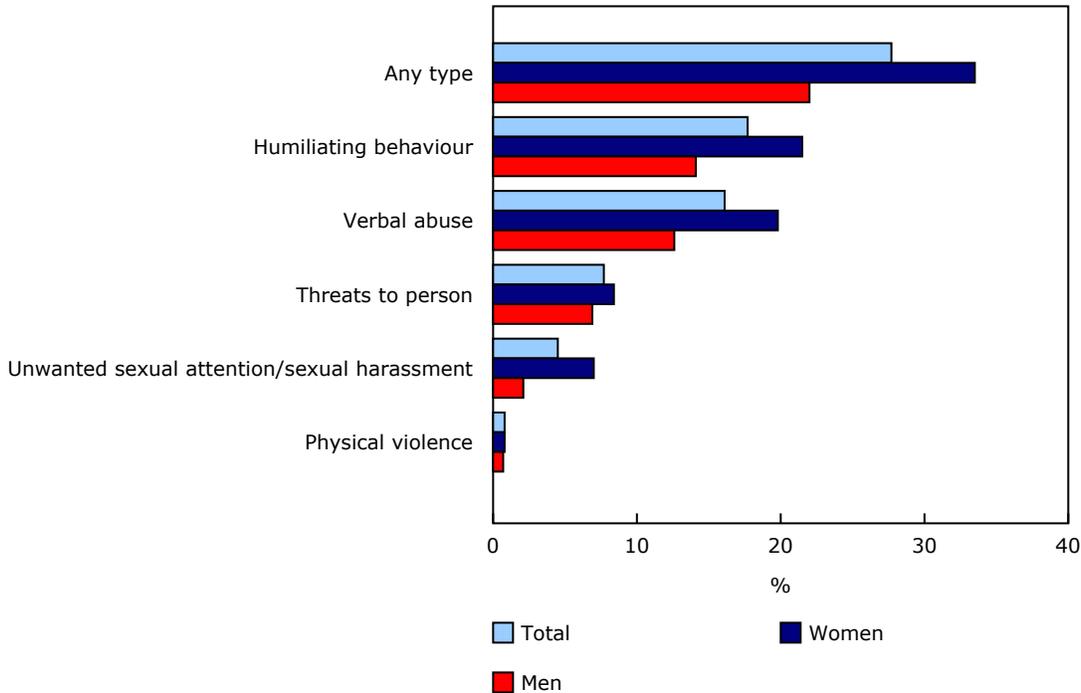
While women were consistently more likely than men to report being a victim of harassment, this increased vulnerability was most pronounced for unwanted sexual attention and sexual harassment, one of the least prevalent forms of harassment. In 2019, 7% of women respondents reported unwanted sexual attention or sexual harassment in the year prior to the survey, about 3.5 times higher than the proportion for men respondents (2%).

The frequency of harassment was often greater for women than men, with women respondents experiencing multiple instances of the same type of harassment more often than men. Again, unwanted sexual attention and sexual harassment had one the greatest gender divides: 4% of women respondents experienced two or more instances of unwanted sexual attention or sexual harassment in the year preceding the survey, compared with 0.8% of men respondents.



Chart 1

Proportion of university and college teaching faculty, PhD students and postdoctoral fellows who experienced harassment in the year prior to the survey, by gender of victim, 2019



Note(s): The sample is restricted to only those who have a position in either a college or university, but not both. All differences between women and men respondents are statistically significant at $p < 0.05$, except for physical violence.

Source(s): Statistics Canada, Survey of Postsecondary Faculty and Researchers, 2019.

Risk of workplace harassment highest among persons with disabilities, Indigenous peoples and sexual minority persons

Beyond gender, certain characteristics were associated with an increased risk of workplace harassment in the postsecondary context. In all cases, among the population groups included in the survey, persons with disabilities, Indigenous peoples and sexual minority groups represented less than 10% of the faculty and researchers in colleges and universities.

At highest risk were teaching staff and researchers who self-reported having a disability or a physical or mental impairment that creates functional limitations or could produce disadvantages in their employment. Specifically, almost half (46%) of respondents with disabilities experienced some form of harassment in the year prior, over 1.5 times the proportion for respondents without disabilities (26%). It should be noted that self-reporting disability yields an underestimation of some disability types when compared with rates from other surveys, such as the Canadian Survey on Disability, which uses the disability screening questions.

Indigenous peoples, who accounted for 1.9% of the academic community respondents, were also more likely to report being a victim of workplace harassment. In 2019, 40% of First Nations, Métis and Inuit faculty and researchers experienced humiliating behaviour, verbal abuse, or another form of harassment in the year preceding the survey. This compares with 27% of non-Indigenous staff and researchers.

The results also indicate that sexual minority respondents within the academic community faced more harassment than their heterosexual counterparts. This increased risk was seen among both men and women, with the exception of lesbian teaching staff and researchers, whose risk was similar to heterosexual women.

One characteristic generally not related to a risk of harassment was belonging to a group designated as a visible minority, where rates were the same between visible minority and non-visible minority respondents. This finding is consistent with results on harassment in Canadian workplaces overall and with students' experiences of unwanted sexual behaviours in postsecondary schools. Further research is needed to determine any differences among specific racialized groups.

Persons in positions of authority responsible for most cases of harassment against PhD students and postdoctoral fellows

The perpetrators of workplace harassment in postsecondary institutions varied, though they were most commonly persons in positions of authority when the target was a PhD student or postdoctoral fellow. A full two-thirds (66%) of doctoral students and postdoctoral fellows who experienced harassment identified the perpetrator as a person with direct authority over them or who occupied a senior position in the academic community.

In contrast, colleagues or peers (43%), along with students (42%), were most often identified as responsible for workplace harassment against university and college teachers.

For both researchers and faculty members, the overwhelming majority of respondents identified men as the persons responsible, ranging from 60% to 80% depending on the relationship of the victim to the harasser and the gender of the victim.

Most targets of workplace harassment in postsecondary institutions take action against the harasser

Most faculty and researchers (70%) targeted by workplace harassment took some form of action, such as confronting the person or people responsible for the harassment, reporting the harassment to someone with the authority to act, talking to someone else at their institution, or filing a formal complaint.

In general, women respondents who experienced harassment were more likely than men respondents to take action: 73% compared with 65% of men. This was true for almost all forms of harassment. One exception was unwanted sexual attention or sexual harassment, where men were as likely as women to take action (72% of men and 71% of women).

Further study is needed to assess the implications of harassment on career progression, as well as how the COVID-19 pandemic shutdowns and the corresponding shifts to online working and teaching may have impacted harassment and discrimination among faculty, graduate students and postdoctoral fellows across Canadian universities and colleges.

Note to readers

This release summarizes findings of the article released today, titled [Harassment and discrimination among faculty and researchers in Canada's postsecondary institutions](#). The article, funded by Women and Gender Equality Canada, is based on data from the 2019 Survey of Postsecondary Faculty and Researchers.

[The Survey of Postsecondary Faculty and Researchers](#), sponsored by Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, aims to fill data gaps on equity, diversity, and inclusion among those who teach or conduct research in Canada's postsecondary sector, including full- and part-time university faculty, college instructors, postdoctoral fellows, and doctoral students. It provides estimates of how various diversity characteristics—such as gender, visible minority status, Indigenous identity, self-reported disability, sexual orientation, use of official languages and others—may influence career experiences and affect career advancement of the survey respondents in the Canadian academic community.

In the absence of a complete survey frame that lists all postsecondary institutions, faculty and researchers, several files were combined—including tax data, census, Postsecondary Student Information System, immigration, and research funding data sets—to create a survey frame. The survey population was selected from this frame.

Survey weights were adjusted to account for non-respondents, but were not further calibrated due to the unavailability of external control totals that corresponded to coverage of the survey population. As a result, the survey results are only representative of the surveyed population, and not necessarily the target population. Due to the methodology used, survey results cannot be released for individual postsecondary institutions.

Respondents include faculty and researchers at public Canadian colleges and universities at the time of the survey, including full-time and part-time university faculty, college instructors, postdoctoral fellows, and doctoral students. Public Canadian institution staff who do not teach or research, such as administrative staff, janitorial staff and housing staff, are excluded from the survey.

Definitions, data sources and methods: survey number [5299](#).

The article "[Harassment and discrimination among faculty and researchers in Canada's postsecondary institutions](#)" is now available in *Insights on Canadian Society* ([75-006-X](#)).

The infographic "[A look at harassment among college and university faculty and researchers](#)" is now available in the series *Statistics Canada - Infographics* ([11-627-M](#)).

For more information, or to enquire about the concepts, methods or data quality of this release, contact us (toll-free 1-800-263-1136; 514-283-8300; STATCAN.infostats-infostats.STATCAN@canada.ca) or Media Relations (613-951-4636; STATCAN.mediahotline-ligneinfomedias.STATCAN@canada.ca).