

Work-related sexual harassment

Holly Johnson

Sexual harassment in the workplace is not easy to define or measure. The Canada Labour Code, for example, defines conduct as work-related sexual harassment if it is "... likely to cause offence or humiliation to any employee ..." or if it "... might, on reasonable grounds, be perceived by that employee as placing a condition of a sexual nature on employment or on any opportunity for training or promotion" (Canada Labour Code, 1989). However, incidents that may be classified as harassment vary both in the minds of people and in the policies developed by businesses, corporations, and governments. As a result, there is considerable controversy about exactly what constitutes work-related sexual harassment and, also, about the extent of the problem.

Although sexual harassment in the workplace was not its primary focus, the Violence Against Women Survey, conducted by Statistics Canada in 1993, offers some data on the subject (see [Data source](#)). This survey defined several unwelcome actions by men as sexual harassment:

- making the woman uncomfortable by commenting inappropriately about her body or sex life;
- making her uncomfortable by repeatedly asking for a date and refusing to take "no" for an answer;
- leaning over her unnecessarily, getting too close, or cornering her;
- hinting that she could lose her job, or that her employment situation might suffer, if she did not have a sexual relationship with him.

For such incidents to be classified as work-related sexual harassment, the perpetrator had to be the woman's boss, co-worker, client, customer, patient, or student. As defined here, work-related sexual harassment excludes sexual assault (see [Work-related sexual assault](#)).

Young women most at risk

In the 12 months before the survey, 6% of employed women ⁽¹⁾ aged 18 and over (approximately 389,000) had experienced at least one form of workplace sexual harassment ([Table 1](#)). Young women

were the most likely to have been harassed. In 1993, 10% of 18 to 24 year-olds reported that they had experienced work-related sexual harassment in the previous 12 months. At older ages, harassment was less common.

Single women were more likely than married women to be harassed. Nine percent of employed women who were single had experienced harassment in the 12 months before the survey. And although a large proportion of single women were young, this pattern also prevailed at older ages. Single women aged 25 to 44 reported harassment rates comparable to those of unmarried 18 to 24 year-olds. By contrast, the rate among married [\(2\)](#) women was 5%.



Table 1 Women who experienced work-related sexual harassment in past 12 months, selected characteristics

Source: *Violence Against Women Survey, 1993*

Women's rates of work-related sexual harassment also differed by their level of education. Those with some postsecondary education had the highest rate: 8%. The lowest rate (4%) was among women at the extremes of the education continuum: less than high school completion or university graduation.

Little relation to income or region

Women in all income ranges encountered work-related sexual harassment. Regardless of their personal or household income, women reported rates around the national average.

As well, the rate of workplace sexual harassment varied only slightly in different regions. The rate ranged from 4% in Quebec to 7% in Ontario and the Prairies.

Higher lifetime rate

In addition to information pertaining to the previous year, the Violence Against Women Survey gathered data on lifetime rates of workplace sexual harassment. Not surprisingly, these rates were much higher. Fully 23% of Canadian women, a total of 2.4 million, have encountered work-related sexual harassment.

Moreover, many women experienced more than one type of harassment during their working lives ([Table 2](#)). The most common, cited by 77% of women who had been harassed at work, concerned inappropriate comments about their bodies or sex lives. Next in frequency (73%) were accounts of men at work leaning

over them unnecessarily, getting too close, or cornering them. As well, 50% of women who had been harassed reported a man repeatedly asking for a date and refusing to take "no" for an answer. The most serious type of work-related sexual harassment addressed in this survey - a man hinting that the woman could lose her job or that her employment situation might suffer if she did not have a sexual relationship with him - was reported by 18%.



Table 2 Women who have ever experienced work-related sexual harassment, by type of harassment

Source: Violence Against Women Survey, 1993

Over half (55%) of women who had been sexually harassed at work reported incidents involving a co-worker ([Chart](#)). Harassment by a boss was reported by 39%, and by a client or customer, by 13%. In 3% of cases, teachers reported harassment by a student.



Chart Over two million women have experienced work-related sexual harassment.

Source: Violence Against Women Survey, 1993

Summary

According to the Violence Against Women Survey, over a 12-month period work-related sexual harassment affected 6% of working women. Young women and unmarried women were the most vulnerable to harassment. Rates varied between full- and part-time workers, but personal or household income had little relation to the likelihood of being harassed.

The lifetime rate of workplace sexual harassment was much higher than the past year's rate. Well over two million women reported having experienced at least one incident during their working lives.

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Women Canada; the Research Department of the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women; and the staff of the Family Violence Prevention Division of Health Canada for their valuable comments and suggestions in reviewing this article.

Work-related sexual assault

While some definitions of harassment include touching or assault, the Violence Against Women Survey considered these actions to be sexual assault, not harassment. Six percent of women (approximately 593,000) reported having experienced at least one incident of workplace sexual assault. Unwanted sexual touching was more common than forced sexual activity (5% versus 1%), and co-workers and bosses were the most frequent offenders.

Data source

The Violence Against Women Survey was conducted by Statistics Canada between February 1993 and June 1993 on behalf of the federal department, Health Canada. More than 12,000 women aged 18 and older living in the 10 provinces were interviewed by telephone. Respondents were selected at random, and their responses were weighted to represent the Canadian female population. Estimates are expected to be reliable within 1.2% of the true population, 19 times out of 20. Estimates of sub-populations have wider confidence intervals. Respondents were asked about their experiences of sexual and physical assault since the age of 16, about their perceptions of their personal safety, and about their experiences of sexual harassment by men they knew and by strangers.

Because the focus of the Violence Against Women Survey was not work-related harassment, the data are limited. For instance, the survey did not include questions about the industries or occupations in which respondents worked. Nor did it ask respondents about the frequency of harassment, that is, whether these experiences occurred once or on several occasions.

Workplace sexual harassment was defined on the basis of the perpetrator's relationship to the woman - that is, boss, co-worker, client, customer, patient, or student. However, no data were collected on where the incident occurred. Therefore, it is possible that some incidents did not happen in the workplace, although they involved a man that the woman had encountered through her job.

Notes

Note 1

Those who were paid workers or self-employed at the time of the survey or at any time in the 12 months preceding the survey.

Note 2

Includes common-law.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank Douglas Norris and Josephine Stanic of the Housing, Family and Social Statistics Division, David Paton of the Social Survey Methods Division, and Karen Rodgers and Paul McPhie of the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, all of Statistics Canada; Cathy McRae of Status of Women Canada; the Research Department of the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women; and the staff of the Family Violence Prevention Division of Health Canada for their valuable comments and suggestions in reviewing this article.

Reference

- *Revised Statutes of Canada 1985*, updated to April 30, 1993, c. L-2.
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Author

Holly Johnson is with the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics.

Source


Perspectives on Labour and Income, Winter 1994, Vol. 6, No. 4 (Statistics Canada, Catalogue 75-001E). This is the first of six articles in the issue.

 HIGHLIGHTS

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 FRANÇAIS

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Table 1

Women who experienced work-related sexual harassment in past 12 months, selected characteristics

	Employed women	Reported harassment	
	'000		%
Total	6,487	389	6
Age			
18-24 years	1,052	107	10
25-34 years	1,817	151	8
35-44 years	1,754	97	6
45 years and over	1,864	--	--
Marital status			
Single	1,463	133	9
Married*	4,255	201	5
Divorced/separated	613	50	8
Widowed	142	--	--
Not stated	--	--	--
Education			
Less than high school diploma	963	39	4
High school diploma	1,819	107	6
Some postsecondary	2,419	89	8
University degree	1,279	53	4
Not stated	--	--	--
Type of work			
Full-time	4,510	293	6
Part-time	1,975	96	5
Not stated	--	--	--
Personal income			
Less than \$10,000	1,312	73	6
\$10,000-\$19,999	1,652	84	5
\$20,000-\$39,999	2,325	162	7
\$40,000 or more	918	53	6

Not stated/don't know	280	--	--
Household income			
Less than \$20,000	695	46	7
\$20,000-\$39,999	1,499	71	5
\$40,000 or more	3,518	218	6
Not stated/don't know	755	54	7
Regions			
Atlantic	512	26	5
Quebec	1,509	66	4
Ontario	2,534	174	7
Prairies	1,119	75	7
British Columbia	812	47	6
Not stated	--	--	--

Source: Violence Against Women Survey, 1993

** Includes common-law.*

Table 2

Women who have ever experienced work-related sexual harassment, by type of harassment

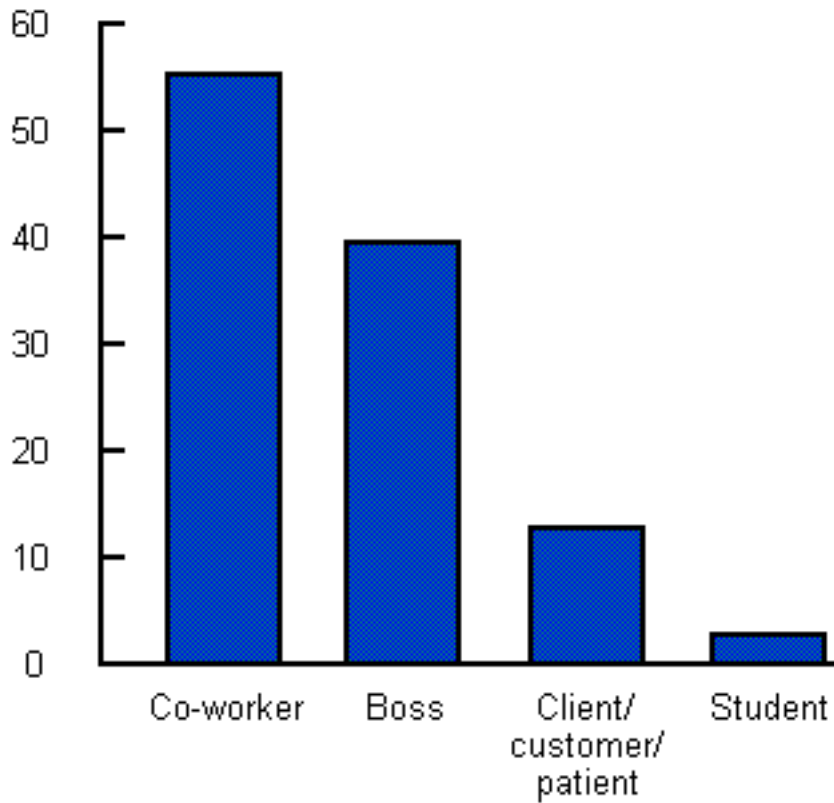
	'000	%
All women (18 years and over)	10,498	
Ever harassed at work*	2,440	100
Type of harassment:		
Making inappropriate comments about her body or sex life	1,886	77
Leaning over unnecessarily, getting too close, or cornering her	1,770	73
Repeatedly asking for a date and not taking "no" for an answer	1,220	50
Saying her job situation might suffer if she did not have a sexual relationship with him	447	18

Source: Violence Against Women Survey, 1993

** Figures do not add to totals because of multiple responses.*

Over two million women have experienced work-related sexual harassment.

% of women ever harassed by:



Source: *Violence Against Women Survey, 1993*

Note: *Figures do not add to 100% because of multiple responses.*