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Gender Matters

Women Disproportionately Report Sexual Harassment in Male-Dominated Industries

Strategies to combat sexual harassment must include expanding opportunities for women to decrease occupational segregation and remove barriers to high level jobs and senior leadership.

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the Women's
Initiative

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A cashier works behind the counter at a fast food restaurant. (Getty/Jeffrey Greenberg)

The steady avalanche of survivors' stories about experiencing sexual harassment is a potent reminder of the pervasiveness of workplace sexual harassment, even decades after such misconduct was declared illegal by the courts. Women and men from all walks of life experience sexual harassment at work. Sexual harassment is defined as unwanted comments, requests, or actions of a sexual nature that are made a term or condition of employment, used to interfere a workers' work performance, or severe or pervasive enough to create a hostile working environment.

Although researchers have examined many different aspects of sexual harassment—such as the frequency of charges, the experiences of different types of workers, and promising prevention strategies—there remain unanswered questions about sexual harassment’s impact, scope, roots, and reach. In particular, too little research has focused on gender differences in sexual harassment charges, and how gender may play a role in where claims arise and who is targeted. A deeper understanding of the different experiences of women and men and the role of gender in the occurrence of sexual harassment may help pinpoint specific problems and areas where targeted interventions are most needed.

Understanding the data on sexual harassment charges

The public discourse often discusses sexual harassment as a problem that primarily confronts women. The available data show that sexual harassment does have a disproportional impact on women. Multiple surveys indicate that a majority of women report experiencing sexual harassment at some point their lives, often starting at a young age. The ramifications of sexual harassment for women are enormous. Researchers have found that women who experience workplace sexual harassment may be more likely to experience financial stress, have lower job satisfaction, and have higher turnover intentions and actual quit rates than women who don’t experience sexual harassment.

But sexual harassment is not solely a women’s problem. Data reported by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), the main federal agency responsible for receiving and investigating workplace sexual harassment charges, show that in fiscal year 2017 just less than one-fifth—16.5 percent—of the sexual harassment charges received by the agency were filed by men, with the remaining 83.5 percent of the charges filed by women. While these numbers make clear that women, who comprise approximately 47 percent of the workforce, are disproportionately more likely file sexual harassment charges relative to their share of the workforce, they also demonstrate that a noteworthy portion of these charges are filed by men as well.

But before drawing larger conclusions from the EEOC’s sexual harassment charge data, it is important to put the data into a broader context. The EEOC received more than 84,000 discrimination charges in FY 2017 and nearly one-third of these charges involved an allegation of some form of harassment, either on the basis of sex, race, national origin, or some other factor. Looking specifically at these harassment charge filings, almost half—46 percent—involved an allegation of sex-based harassment. These sex-based harassment charges include charges alleging harassment of a sexual nature—commonly referred to as sexual harassment—and charges alleging harassment that is nonsexual but based an individual’s gender, such as harassment using derogatory terms about women. Sexual harassment is considered illegal sex discrimination in violation of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Title VII), the landmark federal employment discrimination law enforced primarily by the EEOC.

More than half of sex-based harassment charges filed with the EEOC in FY 2017 involved allegations of sexual harassment, totaling just less than 6,700 charges. However, the sexual harassment charges filed with the EEOC represent only a portion of the incidents involving workplace sexual harassment that occur each year. Sexual harassment charges also can be filed with state agencies—called fair employment practices agencies—that are established by local jurisdictions to receive employment discrimination complaints. Many of these agencies have agreements with the EEOC and can process sexual harassment charges that fall within the EEOC’s jurisdiction. But these agencies also can receive sexual harassment charges filed under different state laws that fall outside of the EEOC’s scope.

When the sexual harassment charges within the EEOC's jurisdiction—both those filed with state agencies and those filed directly with the EEOC—are combined, the total number of sexual harassment charge filings in FY 2017 rises to nearly 10,000 charges. Other charges, such as those filed under individual state laws, are not included in this number. Furthermore, a comprehensive study on harassment conducted by a special EEOC task force concluded in 2016 that sexual harassment is severely underreported. According to the study, an estimated 70 percent of workers who experienced sex-based harassment never formally report it. Thus, while the EEOC's data can be very informative, it may only reflect the tip of the iceberg.

Analyzing sexual harassment charges by gender and industry

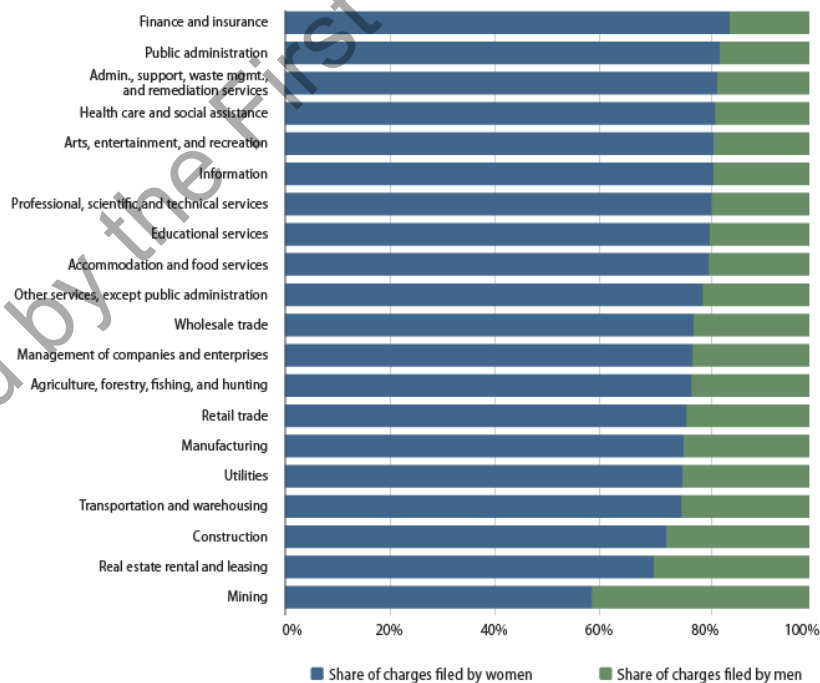
Examining sexual harassment charge data with industry and gender breakdowns provides a good starting point for evaluating differences between women and men in sexual harassment charge filings. Unpublished EEOC data from FY 2010-FY 2015 shows that there were just less than 45,000 sexual harassment charges filed during this time period. Approximately 45 percent of these charges—almost 20,000 filings—included information on the industry where the charge arose.

Because industry information was not available for every charge, the data has limitations. Nonetheless, it does offer a unique snapshot that can provide some initial insights and inform future research. Overall, women and men file sexual harassment charges across all industries. The bulk of the charges are filed by women and vary by industry.

FIGURE 1

Women file significantly more sexual harassment charges across all industries than do men

Filings by industry and sex, fiscal years 2010 through 2015



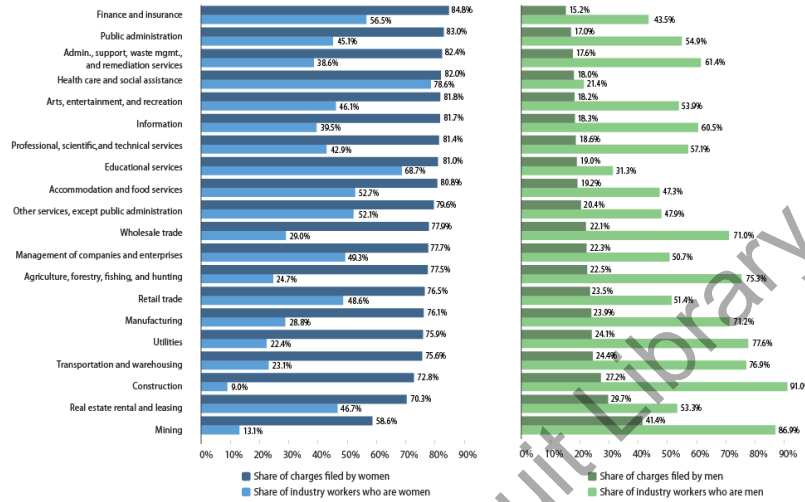
Source: Author's calculations of unpublished data on sexual harassment charge filings from fiscal years 2010 through 2015 from the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, on file with author.



The breakdown in charges by gender does not tell the entire story, in part because different percentages of women and men work in different industries. A closer look at

the data, alongside the percentages of women and men in the workforce in each industry, shows that the percentage of sexual harassment charges filed by women in each industry is consistently higher than the percentage of women who work in the industry. Conversely, the percentage of men filing sexual harassment charges in each industry is consistently lower than the percentage of men who work in that industry. For example, although 41 percent of the sexual harassment charges filed in the mining industry during the time period were filed by men, that percentage is far less than the 86.9 percent of men in the overall mining workforce.

FIGURE 2
Women file more sexual harassment charges than do men, regardless of gender composition of the industry workforce
 Comparison of filings by industry and sex to share of women and men working in industry, fiscal years 2010 through 2015



Sources: Author's calculations of unpublished data on sexual harassment charge filings from fiscal years 2010 through 2015 from the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, on file with author; author's calculations of fiscal years 2010 through 2015 of U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Employed Persons by detailed industry, sex, race, and Hispanic or Latino ethnicity (U.S. Department of Labor, 2010–2015), Table 18, available at <https://www.bls.gov/lsp/tables.asp?tid=2015.htm>.



The data suggest even starker differences between women and men in their reporting of sexual harassment, when the rate of reporting is calculated to take into account the actual percentage of women and men working in that particular industry. For example, the data show that women—who constitute less than one-quarter of the transportation industry workforce—were 10 times more likely to report sexual harassment to the EEOC than men in the transportation industry.

TABLE 1

Women are more likely to report sexual harassment to the EEOC than are men

Likelihood by industry, fiscal years 2010 through 2015

Industry	Women are ___ times more likely to report than are men	Share of industry workers who are men
Construction	27.1	91.0%
Utilities	10.9	77.6%
Agriculture, forestry, fishing, and hunting	10.5	75.3%
Transportation and warehousing	10.3	76.9%
Mining	9.4	86.9%
Wholesale trade	8.6	71.0%
Manufacturing	7.9	71.2%
Admin., support, waste mgmt., and remediation services	7.5	61.4%
Information	6.8	60.5%
Public administration	5.9	54.9%
Professional, scientific, and technical services	5.8	57.1%
Arts, entertainment, and recreation	5.3	53.9%
Finance and insurance	4.3	43.5%
Accommodation and food services	3.8	47.3%
Other services, except public administration	3.6	47.9%
Management of companies and enterprises	3.6	50.7%
Retail trade	3.4	51.4%
Real estate rental and leasing	2.7	53.3%
Educational services	1.9	31.3%
Health care and social assistance	1.2	21.4%

Sources: Author's calculations of unpublished data on sexual harassment charge filings from fiscal years 2010 through 2015 from the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, on file with author; author's calculations of fiscal years 2010 through 2015 of U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Employed Persons by detailed industry, sex, race, and Hispanic or Latino ethnicity (U.S. Department of Labor, 2010–2015), Table 18, available at https://www.bls.gov/cps/cps_aa2015.htm.



Across the board, women report sexual harassment at higher rates than men

The EEOC's unpublished data show that, in every industry, women have higher rates of reporting sexual harassment than men. This result is consistent with other studies concluding that sexual harassment remains a problem that overwhelmingly confronts women throughout the entire workforce. The data does not establish how much more likely women are to experience sexual harassment in certain industries than men, it only indicates how much more likely women are to report sexual harassment to the EEOC than men.

The data also does not explain why there are higher reporting rates for women when compared to men in certain industries. The higher rate of reporting could reflect higher rates of discrimination for women, or it could reflect more familiarity among women with the available legal protections, or some other factor. Men might be more hesitant to come forward about sexual harassment in certain industries, perhaps because of gender-based assumptions about who experiences harassment and who does not.

Women's reporting rates of sexual harassment are higher in male-dominated industries

The data suggest that women may be more likely than men to report sexual harassment in industries that are predominantly male. In the construction industry, for example, 91 percent of the workers are male. Women in that industry are 27 times more likely to report sexual harassment to the EEOC than men. Meanwhile, in the health care and social assistance industry, where 21 percent of the workers are male, women are only 1.2 times more likely to report sexual harassment than men. This finding is consistent with other research suggesting that women are at a greater risk of sexual harassment in male-dominated industries.

In 2017, a Pew Research Center survey found that more women had experienced sexual harassment in male-dominated industries compared to female-dominated industries—

at a difference of 28 percent versus 20 percent. Research examining the intersection of gender and power in the workplace concluded that women can be targets of harassment when they step out of perceived gender norms, such as by moving into positions of authority and/or historically male occupations. Strategies to reduce occupational segregation and gender imbalances in different industries could help challenge longstanding assumptions about women's jobs and men's jobs and drive much-needed workplace culture change. Additionally, a growing body research exploring the most effective strategies to combat sexual harassment has concluded that greater organizational diversity and increasing the number of women in the highest ranks of a company can help reduce workplace sexual harassment.

The full picture of sexual harassment at work still isn't clear

The existing EEOC research on sexual harassment in the workplace only scratches the surface. These data only compare the likelihood of reporting sexual harassment between men and women within an industry. Thus, although women are 27 times more likely to report sexual harassment than men in construction, that does not mean women report sexual harassment in the construction industry at a higher rate than women report sexual harassment in the health care and social assistance industry. More research could help shed light on the likelihood of women or men to report sexual harassment between industries.

More research is also needed about the different experiences of sexual harassment survivors. Research suggests that women of color can be targeted for sexual harassment because of factors such as the intersection of race and gender biases, demeaning sexual stereotypes, and a greater likelihood of women of color working in low-wage jobs where the power imbalances can be most stark. Furthermore, there is too little data on workplace sexual harassment experiences of LGBTQ and nonbinary individuals. Two existing studies suggest high rates of sexual harassment experienced by many of these workers: a study by the Williams Institute found that 35 percent of LGB-identified workers who were out in their workplace reported being harassed at work, and the National Transgender Discrimination survey found that 50 percent of transgender individuals reported being harassed at work. The National Transgender Discrimination survey also found that that risk of workplace harassment and workplace sexual assault was higher for those earning lower incomes.

Conclusion

Combatting sexual harassment requires an intentional, comprehensive focus on the real-world experiences of all workers. Only through such a focus can workplaces and policymakers identify and target the different factors—such as systemic power imbalances, gender stereotypes, and gaps in workplace protections—that influence when and where sexual harassment occurs. The data discussed herein provide a useful snapshot to explore gender differences in sexual harassment reporting. They also suggest a need for targeted efforts to combat gender-based assumptions about where women and men can and should work. Furthermore, ongoing work to focus more attention on workplace culture change and create workspaces that are welcoming and inclusive for all workers should remain a top priority. But, the lack of data and research on sexual harassment also make clear the need for concrete investments at every level—in both the public and private sector—to build the body of research that can begin to answer the many questions that remain unanswered. This includes more federal and state dollars focused on improving the quality of data collected on sexual harassment and analyzing data broken down by race, gender, ethnicity, LGBTQ status, and other characteristics to better understand the experiences of all survivors. Funding more academic research can add important evidence-based insights about best practices in combatting harassment. Furthermore, employers themselves can undertake and report

on efforts to assess workplace climate, the diverse experiences of workers within their workplace, and the effectiveness of different strategies in rooting out discriminatory practices. It is critical to embrace these and other strategies to make meaningful strides in ridding the workplace of sexual harassment once and for all.

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