

Workplace Sexual Harassment 30 Years on: A Review of the Literature

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Despite its proscription in legal jurisdictions around the world, workplace sexual harassment (SH) continues to be experienced by many women and some men in a variety of organizational settings. The aims of this review article are threefold: first, with a focus on workplace SH as it pertains to management and organizations, to synthesize the accumulated state of knowledge in the field; second, to evaluate this evidence, highlighting competing perspectives; and third, to canvass areas in need of further investigation. Various ascribed through individual (psychological or legal consciousness) frameworks, sociocultural explanations and organizational perspectives, research consistently demonstrates that, like other forms of sexual violence, individuals who experience workplace SH suffer significant psychological, health- and job-related consequences. Yet they often do not make formal complaints through internal organizational procedures or to outside bodies. Laws, structural reforms and policy initiatives have had some success in raising awareness of the problem and have shaped rules and norms in the employment context. However, there is an imperative to target further workplace actions to effectively prevent and respond to SH.

Research on workplace sexual harassment (SH) has proliferated over the past 30 years since its recognition as a socio-legal phenomenon in the 1970s. This review article synthesizes and evaluates this accumulated knowledge, highlighting several competing perspectives and canvassing areas in need of investigation. The paper is structured under five broad headings. The first section presents an overview of the phenomenon, outlining the way SH is defined, the prevalence of the problem and its associated costs. The second section addresses how and why SH occurs, outlining the behaviours associated with SH and theoretical perspectives which propose the motivations of perpetrators, how perceptions of SH are shaped and the proclivity of subsequent responses. The third section covers research addressing the characteristics of harassers and targets of SH and perceptions of SH. The fourth section turns to the literature addressing organizations, presenting mixed findings about the settings in which SH occurs and critiques of grievance management processes. The

fifth and final section of the review identifies the limitations of research to date and the associated gaps in knowledge that require further investigation.

The current review will focus on SH where the majority of research has been generated – in the context of employment, although SH may also be unlawful in the provision of goods and services, in the membership of a committee or in the administration of federal laws and programmes (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) 2004b). Effective legal regulation of SH provides a means of redress for the harms that targets experience, and a large international literature, and a vibrant feminist legal literature in particular, has critiqued statutory provisions and legal complaints mechanisms and proceedings (e.g. Easta and Saunders 2008; Fredman 1997; Hely 2008; Thornton 2002). However, the legal context of SH will be addressed in this review only insofar as it is a precondition that ‘enables, empowers and legitimizes other extra legal strategies’ (e.g. corporate regulation

and practices) in the shadows of that law (Bacchi and Jose 1994, p. 10; Mason and Chapman 2003; Parker 1999).

Context: definitions, incidence and costs

SH defined

The naming of workplace SH and its proscription in legal jurisdictions around the world have been important in giving voice to this gendered harm. Though the phenomenon itself has ancient lineage (Thornton 2002), the socio-legal recognition of SH is of relatively recent origin, emerging in the US from a radical feminist grassroots movement (MacKinnon 1979). Subsequent empirical research in Europe demonstrated that millions of women suffer SH in their working lives, consequently forcing the problem into the public light (MacKinnon 1979; Rubinstein 1987) where it quickly entered feminist and equality of employment opportunity discourse, and translated to laws and practices in different cultural, legal and political contexts around the world (Zippel 2006). At an international level, SH has been recognized and addressed by the International Labour Organization, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, the European Union, and the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women. In response to the problem, organizations have produced policies and collective agreement clauses, issued guidance on complying with laws, provided training, and introduced SH complaints procedures (McCann 2005).

Sexual harassment is one of a range of abusive or counterproductive workplace behaviours which have hierarchical power relations at their core. These behaviours include general bullying, mobbing, racial harassment and sex-based harassment, such as verbal put-downs, abusive remarks and marginalizing or exclusionary behaviours on the basis of gender (Thornton 2002; Zippel 2006). However, in contrast to these other abusive workplace behaviours, SH has an explicitly sexual dimension. It is also distinguished from harassment based on race or disability in that the conduct may be excused as welcome attention (Samuels 2003).

Sexual harassment can be understood as a psychological construct; 'unwanted sex-related behaviour at work that is appraised by the recipient as offensive, exceeding her resources, or threatening her

well-being' (Fitzgerald *et al.* 1997b, p. 15), or according to its legal definition, which varies by jurisdictional context. Almost 50 countries prohibit SH in legislation (McCann 2005). In the US, for example, SH coverage is based on 30 years of Title VII Civil Rights Act 1964 case law and policy guidance by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). In the UK, until 2005, SH was outlined in some paragraphs of the Sex Discrimination Act 1975, under unlawful discrimination on the grounds of sex and is now explicit in Section 4A of the Act (Pina *et al.* 2009). In Australia, SH is covered by the federal Sex Discrimination Act 1984 and by state-based anti-discrimination legislation. While there is no universal definition, most statutes contain similar elements, such as descriptions of the conduct as unwanted or unwelcome, and which has the purpose or effect of being intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive. Statutes also frequently refer to vicarious liability, whereby organizations may be held liable unless they can establish they took all reasonable steps to prevent the acts or that they promptly corrected the conduct after it became evident (e.g. Newton 2007; see Markert, 2005 for a cross-national comparison of SH law). Case law often provides for SH which occurs not only at the physical location of employment, but outside the immediate workplace. Australian courts have been found to take a broad interpretation in assigning vicarious liability, including with respect to off-duty SH, such as SH that occurs at Christmas parties and other social functions, external premises/car parks, at work conferences and on work-related trips (Easteal and Saunders 2008; Hely 2008; McDonald *et al.* 2008). Notably distinct amongst countries outlawing SH is France, where SH is a criminal offence defined narrowly in terms of the use of coercion to obtain sexual favours and where there is no vicarious liability provision (Saguy 2003). Legislation frequently cites a number of additional contentious elements such as 'standards of reasonableness' (and from whose perspective this is considered), whether the offensive behaviour need be repeated and the extent to which the harasser could have anticipated that the conduct would be offensive or intimidating. Critiques of these statutory elements are reviewed elsewhere (see, for example, Berdahl 2007; O'Neill and Payne 2007), highlighting that SH continues to defy simplistic definition, but rather, brings with it contradictions, ambiguities and progressive and regressive interpretations (Mason and Chapman 2003).

Prevalence and incidence of SH

Overall, prevalence studies (the total number of cases to a population or sub-population) suggest a persistence of SH in many workplaces. Importantly, however, prevalence estimates diverge markedly according to methodological protocols such as sample size and diversity; whether the surveys targeted random samples from the community or a specific industry or sector; whether SH was operationalized according to a legal or behavioural definition; and the retrospective time-frame specified to participants. American estimates indicate that 40–75% of women and 13–31% of men have experienced workplace SH (Aggarwal and Gupta 2000). In a meta-analytic review of 74 national European studies in 11 member states, Timmerman and Bajema (1999) wrote that between 17% and 81% of employed women reported experiencing some form of SH in the workplace. They attributed low rates in Sweden, Denmark and Luxembourg (2%, 11% and 17%, respectively) to study methodologies which asked a single question and used short, retrospective time periods (3 months in Sweden).

Conversely, high rates in Austria and Germany (80% and 72%, respectively) were related to extended comprehensive definitions of SH (Timmerman and Bajema 1999). Indeed, asking respondents directly whether or not they have experienced SH according to legally defined objective measures leads to substantially lower estimates than studies using perceptual measures where behaviours believed to constitute SH are listed (Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) 2008; Illies *et al.* 2003). In another meta-analytic study conducted in the US, Illies *et al.* (2003) quantified this difference, reporting that rates of SH by respondents' own definitions were less than half the number of reports of potentially harassing incidents believed by researchers to constitute SH. Qualitative studies further support the assertion that individuals frequently minimize behaviours that may constitute SH. They identify that, in some masculine work cultures, women avoid defining their experiences as SH in order to be viewed as competent and as team players (Collinson and Collinson 1996) or because their organizations sanction or even mandate the sexualized treatment of workers (Williams 1997). What this research highlights is that there is significant variation in prevalence estimates, even in studies exploring similar research questions, raising uncertainty about the extent to which prevalence estimates are the result of

true cultural or jurisdictional variations (Timmerman and Bajema 1999).

Evidence is similarly mixed on whether the incidence of SH (the number of new cases per population in a given time period) has changed over time. Three large-scale studies conducted by the US Merit Systems Protection Board (USMSPB) in 1981, 1988 and 1994 of over 8000 federal employees across a range of workplaces revealed that the only category of seven types of SH that had declined was 'pressure for dates'. For more serious forms of harassment, the levels either increased or stayed the same. The most severe category, 'actual or attempted rape or assault', showed a fourfold increase across survey administrations (USMSPB 1981, 1988, 1994). Another US-based, state-wide victimization survey found that almost 20% of working people experienced sexual or gender harassment in each of four years (King *et al.* 2009), while claims of SH filed with US federal and state agencies rose 19% between 1992 and 2005 (Elkins *et al.* 2008). Conversely, in Australia, the incidence of SH in the community apparently decreased from 28% of women and 7% of men in 2003 to 22% of women and 5% of men in 2008 (AHRC 2008). These mixed findings point to the need to exercise caution in drawing conclusions about longitudinal trends, even in replicated studies using identical methodologies.

Further compounding the challenges of tracking the incidence of SH are risks of conflating the 'true' incidence of SH with changes in sociocultural understandings of SH, and hence the likelihood of individuals' affirming or denying that they have experienced it. The extent to which sexual behaviour at work is identified as SH is influenced by factors including political events, the presence and implementation of organizational policies that name SH and provide for grievance processes, the level of support by public institutions for anti-discrimination legislation and cultural mores (MacKinnon 2007; Marshall 2005; McCann 2005; Parker 1999). In a Spanish study, for example, it was found that many victims of SH did not conceptualize unwanted sexual advances as attacks against their sexual freedom, nor as episodes of gender discrimination, but rather as 'facts of life', which were unpleasant but inevitable (Valiente 1998). It is important to note, however, that exposure to sexual behaviour at work results in negative consequences regardless of whether the behaviours are identified as such (Berdahl and Aquino 2009; Magley *et al.* 1999; Welsh 1999). Messages in the media and in popular culture have also been argued to influence the perceptions of the general community towards

SH. Media strategies may undermine public awareness of the extent of the gendered harm caused by SH by presenting every case as a potentially vexatious one or by juxtaposing two opposing interpretations: harmless prank or sex crime, without communicating how readers should weigh opposing versions (Mahood and Littlewood 1997). This framing of SH also promotes what Magley *et al.* (1999) refer to as the 'whiner hypothesis', which is that complaints of SH are overestimated, a view that has been consistently disputed in previous research (Illies *et al.* 2003). Further, the media has been criticized for structuring narratives and interpretations of SH as psychological imbalance or individual aberration, rather than a more systematic, entrenched problem (Mahood and Littlewood 1997), and for exaggerating the threat of individual rights-based legal cases through uneven reporting of complainant wins rather than defendant wins (Cahill 2001).

Costs and outcomes

Studies consistently demonstrate that targets of SH experience a range of significant negative psychological, health and job-related outcomes (Fitzgerald *et al.* 1997a). Mental and physical health consequences range from irritation and anxiety to anger, powerlessness, humiliation, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (Bergman *et al.* 2002; Crocker and Kalember 1999; Magley *et al.* 1999; Stockdale 1998; Willness *et al.* 2007). Poorer psychological outcomes have been associated with harassment that: is perpetrated by a supervisor (as opposed to a co-worker); involves sexual coercion; occurs cross-racially; takes place over a long period of time; and occurs in male-dominated settings (Collinsworth *et al.* 2009; Woods *et al.* 2009). Even observing or hearing about the SH of co-workers can foster 'bystander' stress (Schneider 1996) and other negative outcomes that parallel those of direct targets (Miner-Rubino and Cortina 2007), such as team conflict, declines in financial performance and occupational stress (Raver and Gelfand 2005). Job-related factors consistently linked with SH include absenteeism, lower job satisfaction, commitment and productivity, and employment withdrawal (Chan *et al.* 2008; Charlesworth 2006; Fitzgerald *et al.* 1999; Hayes 2004; HREOC 2004a).

Individual and job-related consequences of SH also impose significant, well-documented costs on organizations. Direct organizational costs include those related to turnover and resulting recruitment, training and development, the costs of investigating the com-

plaint and the legal costs arising from actions brought against the organization. The US Army estimated that turnover accounted for approximately 67% of the aggregated total annual cost of the harassment reported (Faley *et al.* 1999). Indirect and often less quantifiable costs include reduced morale or motivation of employees, tardiness or absenteeism, damage to external reputation and loss of shareholder confidence (Fitzgerald *et al.* 1997a; HREOC 2004b; Lengnick-Hall 1995). In a recent meta-analysis of the antecedents and consequences of SH, it was calculated that lost productivity alone in cases of SH cost around US\$22 500 per person (Willness *et al.* 2007). In 2010, the US Equal Opportunity Commission reported that they received and resolved over 12,000 charges of SH at a cost of over \$48 million in monetary benefits over and above litigation (EEOC 2010). These figures far outweigh the generally low levels of compensation awarded to complainants in formal jurisdictions (Fredman 1997).

How and why SH occurs

Behaviours

Behaviours that define SH are heterogeneous and variously categorized, but are often presented on a continuum, from requests for socialization or dates, personal insults and ridicule, leering, offensive comments and non-verbal gestures, to sexual propositions and sexual and physical assault (Bastian *et al.* 1996; Canadian Human Rights Commission 2006; Gelfand *et al.* 1995). Non-physical SH such as sexual teasing, jokes, remarks and comments are most frequently reported by complainants, and include verbal remarks about the size of women's breasts and buttocks, requests to see parts of their bodies, offensive language, comments of a degrading nature, gestures such as exposure or 'flashing', displays of offensive, sexual materials and intrusive questions about private life, sexual matters or appearance (AHRC 2008; Berdahl and Aquino 2009; Fitzgerald *et al.* 1997b; Hayes 2004; Magley *et al.* 1999). Behaviours which reflect sexual coercion include offers of rewards such as bonuses, pay increases, options of extra work and promotion; and those related to sexual threats include withdrawal of financial or other entitlements, reductions in work hours, dismissal or other threats of life being made difficult (Fitzgerald *et al.* 1997a; MacKinnon 2007; McDonald *et al.* 2008). Research is also beginning to emerge on the growth in 'cyber-

SH', including the display of offensive and sexually explicit visual material on computers and mobile phones (Ronalds 2006). This form of harassment may occur both within and outside the immediate location of the workplace and beyond work hours, but, in the complainant's favour, often involves tangible or traceable evidence (McDonald *et al.* 2008). Physical SH includes behaviours such as kissing, cuddling, massaging, touching, pinching, grabbing, biting, bra-flicking, hitting, licking, groping, undoing clothes, spitting and attempted rape (AHRC 2008; Hayes 2004).

Individuals often report that they have experienced multiple forms of harassing behaviours (AHRC 2008; Rospenda *et al.* 2009). While verbal harassment may appear to be less threatening and more socially acceptable than harassment involving physical contact, sexually offensive humour and sexualized imagery are argued to be damaging in that they serve to mark certain workplaces as masculinized spaces which reinforce and perpetuate discrimination and harassment in socially acceptable ways (Cleveland *et al.* 2005; Thornton 2002). This is analogous to research on domestic violence which suggests psychological or emotional abuse may be more harmful and a stronger predictor of post-traumatic stress disorder than physical abuse (Folingstad and DeHart 2000; Street and Arias 2001). Lim and Cortina (2005) also found that women rarely experienced SH in isolation, but instead reported both SH and general non-sexualized mistreatment or incivility. The co-occurrence of 'sledgehammer harassment' (extreme cases of harassment that would make tabloid headlines) and the 'dripping tap' variety (mundane, everyday instances) (Wise and Stanley 1987) raises dilemmas for law, research and policy because, as Thornton (2002, p. 435) argues, a 'single, sexualized heterosexual act, with its blatant lasciviousness and lust, invariably trumps a succession of seemingly trivial put-downs, even though the latter may reveal more about structural discrimination on the ground of sex than the former'.

A framework called the outrage management model accounts for the strategies used by harassers, proposing that, when powerful individuals behave in a way that others perceive as unjust, they use one or more of five tactics to dampen outrage (Scott and Martin 2006). Evidence for outrage management tactics was found in the high-profile 1991 case of Anita Hill, who accused Clarence Thomas, then nominated to the US Supreme Court, of sexually harassing her a decade earlier (Scott and Martin

2006), and in less prominent cases in Australian judicial decisions (McDonald *et al.* 2010). These tactics include *cover-up*, where perpetrators act away from witnesses, such as clients who perceive little accountability for their actions through lack of visibility and interactions alone or offsite (Gettman and Gelfand 2007). The second tactic is *devaluation* of the target of SH, such as derogatory labelling or criticism of performance and claims about dishonesty or incompetence. The third tactic, *reinterpretation*, involves denying or claiming misinterpretation of some of the actions, minimizing their seriousness and blaming others. Examples of reinterpretation have been found in studies of employer responses to SH claims (e.g. Charlesworth 2006), and is argued by Quinn (2002) to be one of the ways in which men may objectify and suppress empathy towards women. *Official channels*, the fourth tactic, involves claims by respondents that procedural fairness has taken place and justice has been served through organizational grievance processes, thereby dampening outrage. In reality, appeals to senior officials, professional organizations and courts often work against the victim because these processes are slow to respond and emphasize formal processes, confidentiality and technicalities (Hulin *et al.* 1996; Rowe 1996). The fifth and final tactic, *intimidation and bribery*, takes the form of threats of poor references, unwelcome job assignments or dismissal, or the promise of favourable references, comfortable job assignments or/and promotions (Scott and Martin 2006).

Theories guiding SH research

Researchers have lamented the focus in the literature on definitional distinctions of SH (Popovich and Warren 2010) at the expense of theoretical developments which may guide prevention programmes to effect cultural change (O'Neill and Payne 2007; Welsh 1999; Willness *et al.* 2007). Nevertheless, a number of theoretical perspectives have been influential in guiding SH research. Covered here are: the natural-biological model; sociocultural explanations which focus on the ways in which harassment stands as a manifestation of a wider system of asymmetrical power relations between men and women (Thomas 1997); theories of legal consciousness which address how perceptions of SH are shaped and the likelihood of subsequent responses (Blackstone *et al.* 2009); and organizational perspectives which ascribe the incidence and form of SH to particular workplace

contexts (Blackstone *et al.* 2009; Chamberlain *et al.* 2008; Gruber 1998).

Consistent with the initially recognized scenario of SH, where a male boss harasses a female subordinate, the natural-biological model proposes that SH results from natural and inevitable feelings of sexual desire expressed primarily by men towards women (Berdahl 2007). The biological model holds that SH is not actually harassment and, consequently, does not have deleterious consequences, is not sexist and is not discriminatory (Tangri *et al.* 1982). Unsurprisingly, this explanation has been largely dismissed in the recent literature, not least because of the lack of rigour in allowing for differential predictions of behaviour and a lack of flexibility to explain phenomena such as same-sex harassment and harassment of lower status men by women in positions of power (Foote and Goodman-Delahunty 2005).

A sociocultural model which explains why SH occurs is sex-role spillover, which proposes that SH is a form of socio-sexual behaviour at work which results because of the roles of men as sexual agents and women as sexual objects (Gutek *et al.* 1990). According to this perspective, SH occurs in male-dominated workplaces because a woman's gender is a salient, singular and distinctive feature, while in female-dominated work environments, her sex role becomes a more salient feature than her work role (Gutek and Morasch 1982). Vogt *et al.* (2007) suggest that male-dominated work settings are rife for SH because they place a high value on masculine qualities such as power, toughness, dominance, aggressiveness and competitiveness – settings in which women may disrupt the masculine camaraderie that infuses the culture. In such settings, women and ethnic minority groups are perceived as organizational interlopers, potentially reducing the benefits that belong to the hegemonic group (white males), thereby triggering higher rates of harassment (Bergman and Henning 2008). As explained later, however, there is contradictory evidence in the literature on the effect of job gender ratio on SH which challenges sex-role spillover explanations. More fundamentally, studies of sex-role spillover are limited by their use of occupational sex ratios as proxies for sex roles (Welsh 1999).

In contrast to natural-biological and sex-role spillover perspectives, power models have garnered more recent attention in the literature. Although variously interpreted, in general, power perspectives suggest that the SH phenomenon arises from men's economic power over women, which enables them to

exploit and coerce women sexually (MacKinnon 1979; Zalk 1990). In early work, Brant and Too (1994) argued that the power model of SH ignored extensive evidence suggesting that harassment from peers or juniors can be more common than harassment by those in authority. However, reconciling the power model of SH with studies identifying that co-workers are frequently harassers, Samuels (2003) suggests that power from a feminist perspective is not a pure or unmediated force, but that 'in society, the balance of power lies with men and even if women are in more senior positions they are made more vulnerable by the fact they are women' (p. 477). Another way in which power can be conceived is within a dependency framework, where clients or customers have power *vis-à-vis* an employee through control over evaluations and through the dependence on the client's business (Gettman and Gelfand 2007; Pfeffer and Salancik 2003). Recently, Popovich and Warren (2010), building on French and Raven's (1959) typology of the bases of power (e.g. legitimate, coercive, referent), proposed a promising model of the role of power across individual, organizational and societal levels.

The majority of orthodox feminist theories guiding SH research account for male to female SH and assume that both perpetrator and target are heterosexual. However, SH is also reported by men (both hetero- and homosexual) and lesbian women. In order to explain SH from a sexual orientation perspective, Epstein (1997, p. 165), drawing on Butler's (1990) notion of the heterosexual matrix, suggests that SH against gay men and lesbian women is 'heterosexist'. That is, individuals are schooled into gender-appropriate heterosexual sexuality which is subsequently rendered compulsory through the punishment of deviance from heterosexual norms of masculinity and prescribed feminine gender roles, via homophobic, antigay biases and gender hostility (Brogan *et al.* 1999; Pryor and Whalen 1997).

Perspectives which help explain the antecedents and outcomes of SH from an organizational perspective generally underscore one or more of three salient features. The first is workplace culture, which is the extent to which the organizational climate tolerates SH and the presence, accessibility and effectiveness of harassment remedies (Fitzgerald *et al.* 1995; Fitzgerald *et al.* 1997a). Chamberlain *et al.* (2008) proposed that four aspects of workplace culture were particularly important for SH: co-worker solidarity; supervisor harmony; workplace anonymity; and physicality of the work. The second workplace

feature emphasized in organizational theories of SH is job gender context, which is the gendered nature of the individual's work group (Fitzgerald *et al.* 1995). The third feature is differential worker power (Chamberlain *et al.* 2008), which posits that women's subordinated organizational positions render them vulnerable to SH (Welsh 1999).

Theories of legal consciousness address how perceptions of SH are shaped and the likelihood of subsequent responses (Blackstone *et al.* 2009). The way in which employees come to understand what is happening to them as 'discrimination' and make formal complaints is a complex process informed by legal consciousness, of what has been called 'naming, blaming, claiming' (Felstiner *et al.* 1980–1981). That is, to get to a point where an individual makes a complaint, they have to 'see' an action or experience as detrimental (naming); hold another person or entity responsible for the perceived injury (blaming); and voice their grievance and seek a remedy (claiming). Drawing on feminist psychological theories of women's development, Cairns (1997) offers an explanatory account of the mechanisms through which women's silence is perpetuated. She argues that, first, women are psychologically disempowered as a result of patriarchal socialization as 'Other' to a male norm. Second, women have accommodated male-defined norms of femininity and have consequently developed a circumscribed sense of personal agency, rather than a psychology of entitlement that exists in men. As a result of these two processes, and consistent with the notion of 'naming' the action (Felstiner *et al.* 1980–1981), women may believe that their experiences are not 'real' or that it is they who are in the wrong (Cairns 1997). Third, silence is used as a form of resistance, a way of holding back and refusing to participate.

A contrasting theoretical explanation for the reluctance of individuals who experience SH to report the problem in organizations was proposed by Wear *et al.* (2007) in a study of medical students. They suggested that many (particularly younger) women who have come of age in a world saturated by 'backlash rhetoric and politics', seek to distance themselves from negative characterizations of feminists in the media and a social movement that is seen as divisive, obsolete and associated with women targets. Hunter (2002) similarly suggests that some women seek to actively constitute themselves as non-gendered, non-embodied subjects, disavowing their femininity and any disadvantages flowing from it. These points are illustrative of the 'ideology of individualism' characteristic of

third-wave feminism (Henry 2010) and the backlash against the supposed hegemony of political correctness which is often used to dismiss or discredit the struggle for equal rights for women and to minimize and individualize SH specifically (Hayes 2004; Mahood and Littlewood 1997).

Characteristics of harassers and complainants and perceptions of SH

Characteristics of complainants and harassers

A focus on the predictors of SH targeting is critical in assessing risks and developing policy, but it has been controversial because of a reluctance to blame the victims (Blackstone *et al.* 2009). Universally, studies have demonstrated that most occurrences of SH are by men against women. Around 85% of complaints are filed by women and around 15% by men (where most perpetrators are male), with a small proportion of female perpetrated harassment (Firestone and Harris 2003; HREOC 2004a; Samuels 2003; Stockdale *et al.* 1999). Targets are typically vulnerable: divorced or separated women; young women; women in non-traditional jobs; women with disabilities; lesbian women and women from ethnic minorities; gay men; and young men (Chamberlain *et al.* 2008; European Commission 1999; Fredman 1997; McCann 2005; O'Neill and Payne 2007). For individuals who embody multiple identities, the presence of harassment based on one characteristic (e.g. sex) increases the likelihood of harassment based on another characteristic (e.g. race, sexual orientation) (Buchanan and Fitzgerald 2008; Konik and Cortina 2008; Settles 2006). Minority women for example, face 'double jeopardy', whereby sexual and ethnic prejudice, as well as occupational and economic segregation, lead them to be primary targets of harassment and discrimination (Berdahl and Moore 2006; Buchanan and Fitzgerald 2008).

Women with irregular, contingent or precarious employment contracts are also more susceptible. A study in Japan, for example, showed how a weakened economy reinforced existing patriarchal beliefs and put temporary women workers at increased risk of SH (Takao 2001). Some research also suggests that SH may be targeted at women who step out of place by having masculine characteristics (such as being assertive and leader-like), where the conduct is driven not out of desire for women who meet feminine ideals, but out of a willingness to punish those

who violate them (Berdahl 2007). While women are more likely to experience all forms of harassment, the magnitude of the gender differences is greater for forms that are less frequent and perceived to be more serious, including experiences of unwanted sexual attention and sexual coercion (Cortina *et al.* 2002; Fitzgerald *et al.* 1999).

Compared with the focus on the characteristics of targets of SH, relatively little research has focused on the characteristics of harassers (Pina *et al.* 2009). However, some studies have suggested that harassers lack social conscience, are naïve about heterosexual relationships, and engage in immature, irresponsible, manipulative and exploitative behaviours (Begany and Milburn 2002; Kosson *et al.* 1997; Pryor and Whalen 1997). Harassers are also thought to over-infer women's criticism and rejection, supporting the view that SH is related to aggression rather than seduction (Schweinle *et al.* 2009). No parallel research has been conducted on women who harass men (Foote and Goodman-Delahunty 2005). Sexual harassment is perpetrated both by those in a position of organizational authority (supervisors, managers, employers), as well as by co-workers and clients (HREOC 2003; McDonald *et al.* 2008; O'Neill and Payne 2007). Harassment by clients/customers is receiving increasing attention in the literature (see Yagil 2008 for a review), not least because most organizations, even those which are intolerant of harassment by fellow employees, often have no clear policies for dealing with these behaviours from clients (Handy 2006).

Perceptions of SH

Research has addressed how SH is perceived with respect to the gender of the target, the believability of the complainant and the penalties applied to perpetrators. One of the most robust conclusions is that women are less accepting than men of sexual behaviour at work and view gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention and sexual coercion as more serious (Berdahl and Moore 2006; Gallivan Nelson *et al.* 2007; McCabe and Hardman 2005). Women, more than men, also reject a range of 'myths' associated with SH, including that women fabricate/exaggerate the problem and have ulterior motives for reporting SH (Lonsway *et al.* 2008). Importantly, however, sex differences in perceptions appear to depend on the perpetrator's actions (Osman 2007). That is, gender differences are less apparent when the attention is verbal, ambiguous or less frequent (Hurt *et al.* 1999;

Osman 2004). However, these findings are complicated by reported differences in the gender of the target and the status of the harasser. For example, men and women are more likely to agree that conduct is SH, or that it is more severe, when the perpetrator is a supervisor than a peer or co-worker (Mohipp and Senn 2008; Rotundo *et al.* 2001). Observers also perceive targets as more credible, view the harasser as more responsible and are more likely to believe that the harassment has actually occurred when the target reports the behaviour immediately rather than when reporting is delayed (Balogh *et al.* 2003).

With respect to the gender of the complainant, Jones and Remland (1992) found that individuals were less tolerant of SH when the target was female rather than male. Using a framework which proposed that cognitive schema-driven expectancies lead to negative evaluations of individuals who do not conform to expected gender roles, Madera *et al.* (2007) also found that men who complained of SH were believed less, liked less and punished more than women who complained. Further, the tendency to believe and like female complainants is stronger when they are perceived as physically attractive (Golden *et al.* 2001; Madera *et al.* 2007). Married men and unattractive men (who are viewed as less 'available') are seen as more harassing, presumably because perceptions of harassment are premised in part on commonplace stereotypes about romance (Pryor 1995).

Research has further demonstrated that employee perceptions of organizational tolerance to SH and response severity are significantly related to the frequency of incidents of SH and effectiveness in combating the problem (Gallivan Nelson *et al.* 2007; Miner-Rubino and Cortina 2004). Similarly, perceptions of organizational tolerance have a greater influence on the attitudes and behaviours of employees than the existence of formal organizational rules and regulations (Hulin *et al.* 1996; Pryor *et al.* 1995).

The organizational environment

Organizational contexts where SH occurs

Demonstrating that the extent to which SH occurs is impacted by organizational characteristics, a meta-analysis of 86,000 respondents from 55 probability samples in the US by Illies *et al.* (2003) revealed that the problem is more prevalent in organizations characterized by larger power differentials between

organizational levels, with lower reported incidences in the academic sector and higher reported incidences for military samples. Military settings, in particular, have received significant research attention (e.g. Estrada and Berggren 2009; Fitzgerald *et al.* 1999). Other studies consistently indicate that SH is more frequently experienced by women in male-dominated occupations and work contexts (e.g. law enforcement, fire-fighting, construction), more than women in balanced or in female-dominated workplaces (Gruber 1998; McCabe and Hardman 2005; Willness *et al.* 2007).

However, there are variations in the frequency and severity of SH even within these male-dominated settings. Building on Gruber's concept of *double dominance*, de Haas and Timmerman (2010) found that the nature of male-dominated work environments mediated the relationship between numerical male dominance and SH. This and other research has shown that SH is more problematic in blue-collar male-dominated settings such as fire-fighting, where jobs are typically highly physical and where cultural norms associated with sexual bravado, sexual posturing and the denigration of female behaviour are sanctioned, than in white-collar male-dominated occupations such as accounting (Chamberlain *et al.* 2008; de Haas and Timmerman 2010). Other research by Handy (2006) in New Zealand and Timmerman and Bajema (1999), who reviewed European studies, has also shown that organizational norms and cultures, such as the level of sensitivity to the problem of balancing work and personal obligations, and the extent to which the culture is employee-rather than job-oriented, are more important in predicting the frequency of SH incidents than organizational sex ratios. Indeed, despite high rates of SH in male-dominated workplaces, international research suggests that SH is by no means confined to these environments, but occurs in a wide range of organizational settings (e.g. Ellis *et al.* 1991; McCabe and Hardman 2005).

Formal complaints

Like other forms of sexual violence such as rape (Allen 2007), research consistently demonstrates that reported SH represents only the tip of the iceberg compared with the incidence in the community. Targets of SH often do not make formal complaints through internal organizational procedures or to outside bodies (Firestone and Harris 2003; HREOC 2004a). Indeed, it has been estimated that only

between 5% and 30% of targets file formal complaints, and fewer than 1% subsequently participate in legal proceedings (Fitzgerald *et al.* 1995; Wayte *et al.* 2002). Rather, targets deal with the problem in isolation or with the assistance of friends or co-workers, or by tolerating the behaviours, leaving the organization or resisting in other 'informal' ways. Those who do complain of discrimination have typically reached a point where the workplace disadvantages or detriment that they experienced are sufficient to threaten or preclude their ongoing employment (Conaghan 2004). Factors which inhibit reporting include fear of job loss, especially if insecurely employed, fear of retribution or retaliation, reluctance to be viewed as a victim, self-doubt or the fear of being seen as 'too sensitive', the belief that the harasser will not receive any penalty, lack of knowledge of rights, and lack of accessibility of external supports such as unions or counselling professionals (Dziech and Hawkins 1998; Fielden *et al.* 2010; Hayes 2004; Wear *et al.* 2007). Studies have also reported that these concerns are not unfounded. Reporting harassment experiences often does not improve and sometimes worsens outcomes for the target (Bergman *et al.* 2002; Lee *et al.* 2004).

Targets of SH are more likely to report the harassment or to confront the perpetrator if the harassment involves sexual assault or solicitation of sexual activity (Benavides-Espinoza and Cunningham 2010; Stockdale *et al.* 1999). Relative to the proportion of men and women who experience SH, women report more often than men. Targets are less likely to report the conduct in small organizations where the perpetrator is also the owner or supervisor (Knapp *et al.* 1997). In a rare example of research which explores in-depth accounts of targets' decision-making in reporting SH, Wear *et al.* (2007, p. 23) found medical students declined to 'make waves' or 'raise a stir', but rather used passive or avoidant responses such as standing further away from registrars who touched too often, requesting shifts which avoided working with the offender and removing themselves from situations in which offensive banter was taking place.

Studies have revealed that, where a choice of sanctions for a harasser is available, it is common for the least stringent to be selected, such as a formal or informal warning without further action (European Commission 1999; Salin 2007). These organizational responses deflect any managerial or broader organizational responsibility for discrimination and indicate a 'climate of tolerance'. Hence, there is a need for more proactive leadership in shifting the burden

of identifying unprofessional behaviour from the (more vulnerable) target to the institution itself (Charlesworth 2006; Hayes 2004; Wear *et al.* 2007).

Organizations face significant challenges in developing appropriate policies and consistently implementing corrective action in that they often confront variations in perceptions of what constitutes egregious SH (Jensen and Kleiner 1999). They also need to balance the issues of confidentiality of the identities involved with the ineffectiveness of secrecy and stonewalling (Dziech and Hawkins 1998). Another challenge for organizations is the extent to which it should infer the actual occurrence of SH, from the frequency and patterns of formal complaints it receives. That is, fewer complaints may indicate fewer incidences of SH, or alternatively, a workplace climate in which targets feel unable to lodge a formal grievance if SH occurs.

The management of complaints processes

Since the overwhelming majority of gendered grievances do not reach public fora, the internal management of grievances determines, to some extent, employees' *de facto* employment rights (Edelman *et al.* 1993). In their most narrow reach, SH laws provide legal redress for individuals who have been harassed and hold perpetrators or employers responsible in court (Zippel 2006). However, the employment context provides a set of rules and norms which shape the ways in which organizational decision-makers understand and implement law (Cahill 2001). Workplace SH policy details vary, depending on the nature, location and size of the employer, and there are no universally accepted procedures for implementing them (McCann 2005). However, larger corporations with hundreds of workers generally have a higher standard to attain in discharging the obligation of 'reasonable steps' in vicarious responsibility provisions compared with a small family business (Parker 1999; Walters 2008). Further, similarities in policies are emerging, and common elements often include a policy statement, a complaints procedure, remedial measures, training and monitoring and evaluation (McCann 2005).

Organizational grievance procedures are the most common mechanism through which employee rights are enacted. However, critics argue that grievance procedures are inadequate in dismantling structural inequality because the dual discourses of legal compliance and risk management evident in corporate SH policies (Charlesworth 2002; Thornton 2002) are

more effective in protecting employers from liability; a 'bureaucratic vaccine against lawsuits', than they are in protecting or assisting complainants (Dobbin and Kelly 2007, p. 1234; Edelman *et al.* 1993; Marshall 2005). Organizational policies and grievance procedures are thought to protect organizations in three ways. First, while 'no tolerance' policies may prevent SH from occurring in the first place (Parker 1999), they may also focus more on organizational image than on the wishes of complainants who fear reprisals (Firestone and Harris 2003). Second, policies allow grievances to be remedied internally by compensation, changes in work arrangements and by discipline of the perpetrator, and therefore prevent complainants exposing their employers to liability in the public justice system (Parker 1999). A third way in which SH policies may protect an organization from vicarious liability is that, if a complaint is made in a relevant jurisdiction, the very existence of a policy may assist the employer to escape liability (Parker 1999). At the same time, the threat of vicarious liability and organizational concerns for risk management may lead to the construction of complainants as an organizational risk (Charlesworth 2002); that is, if the target were not pursuing her complaint, there would be no problem to address (Thornton 2002). In one study, for example, management were found to tacitly collude with the harassers' actions, diminishing the possibility of successful action (Handy 2006). In light of this concern, there has been a call for organizations to shift away from operational responses to SH towards initiatives geared at prevention (Michelson and Kramar 2003).

Despite these limitations of complaints management processes, where corporate structures have the will to do so, management systems have a greater capacity to provide training, education, incentives and sanctions to change attitudes and behaviour than legal enactments have, which can make a difference to the everyday lives of many women who would never invoke their rights in a public or legal forum (Hulin *et al.* 1996; Parker 1999). It is generally accepted that these organizational strategies should focus on creating respectful and hospitable work environments that do not derogate individuals on the basis of sex (Berdahl 2007). There is also evidence to suggest that, in some industries and sectors, paper policies have translated into real change in corporate culture as judged by women employees (Still 1997). The strategic importance of transforming corporate cultures is critical, not least because changes that

occur in large organizations are frequently modelled in smaller companies though industry associations, unions and training (Parker 1999).

Future research directions

This review has synthesized and evaluated the accumulated state of knowledge in the field of workplace SH and highlighted several contentious and competing perspectives on the subject. In summary, statistics derived from national prevalence studies, cross-national meta-analyses and research undertaken in targeted organizations and sectors reveal that, despite being unlawful, a continued high prevalence of SH occurs across a wide range of organizational contexts. Evidence also indicates that SH continues to be experienced mainly by women, but also by some men, and that those who experience SH are often reticent to report the problem or seek assistance. In presenting this evidence, several areas in need of investigation are revealed.

Recent research conducted outside liberal market economies provides important sociocultural and legal insights which contribute to the extant SH literature, the vast majority of which has focused on the US (Willness *et al.* 2007) and to a lesser extent the UK, Europe and Australia (see, for example, DeSouza and Cerqueira (2009) on the consequences of SH for Brazilian female domestic workers; Johnson (2010) on the perceptions of types of SH of Nigerian women; and Uggen and Shinohara (2009) on the consciousness of SH in the US and Japan). While some extrapolation across studies in different countries may be warranted, varying cultural, historical and socio-legal features across national contexts inevitably impacts research findings. These factors include the wording of legislative frameworks, patterns of (particularly feminized) labour market participation patterns, distinctive procedural conventions in anti-discrimination jurisdictions, legal consciousness over the life course and the extent to which organizational cultures foster tolerance or complacency. Further, as well as cross-national perspectives, there is a need, within geographic boundaries, for intersectional analyses on how SH manifests according to not only sex, but also other politically marked identities, including age, race and ethnicity.

Critical in developing effective prevention strategies, yet under-researched, are questions around the underlying processes of SH, including the characteristics and motivations of harassers (Berdahl 2007;

McCann 2005; Quinn 2002; Willness *et al.* 2007). Quinn's (2002) qualitative work on 'girl-watching' begins to address such questions by demonstrating how men recognize behaviours in SH policies while at the same time objectifying and attenuating empathy in refusing to see their behaviour as harassing. An understanding of SH at the boundaries of organizations, by clients and customers, also requires further attention, particularly in the contemporary economy, where organizations increasingly rely on contract labour and outsourcing, and where large numbers of women who engage in service work are required to deal with customers or clients (Gettman and Gelfand 2007; Handy 2006). Research could also usefully explore the apparently competing explanations of why SH continues to be under-reported; which is that women are either fearful of retribution or that they engage in backlash politics associated with third-wave feminism, or indeed, the conditions under which each of these explanations hold. Also critical in the context of under-reporting is to understand what might constitute effective individual forms of resistance; including those which oppose strategies used by harassers to dampen outrage such as cover-up and reinterpretation (McDonald *et al.* 2010). A refinement of effective resistance strategies is likely to be particularly important for employees in small firms, which are less likely to develop formal policies and procedures and where the employer may be the harasser.

It is hardly surprising that, with the uncertainties around interpretations of SH outlined in this review, the development of organizational strategies to prevent SH have been less than effective. Policies and procedures that lead to a reduction of SH rely on expanded organizational models which include measures of interpersonal relations as well as organizational structures (Hertzog *et al.* 2008). We know that organizational factors are fundamental in creating an organizational climate that discourages SH (Willness *et al.* 2007) but we have less knowledge of the specific combinations of policies, training programmes and grievance procedures that lead to decreased occurrences. In terms of training, for example, Lonsway *et al.* (2008) demonstrated that individuals with prior training on SH reject SH myths (e.g. women have ulterior motives for reporting the problem) more than untrained individuals do. However, this is one of only a handful of studies which specifically addresses how training programmes or other organizational strategies can effectively challenge tolerance and complacency and

create positive change (Newman *et al.* 2003). Further, as has been demonstrated in the discussion of vicarious liability, even where companies are highly motivated to introduce compliance policies in response to anti-discrimination laws, the development of internal grievance processes may create inevitable tensions between legal and organizational goals (Edelman *et al.* 1993).

The review has also illustrated a number of methodological issues which may inform future research. A general methodological guideline for survey research is that legally defined objective measures are considered more appropriate when assessing the legal outcomes of SH, while behaviourally defined perceptual measures are likely to be more important in predicting target responses and organizational outcomes (Lengnick-Hall 1995). While large-scale studies are useful in revealing the ubiquitous nature of SH and in confirming links between various constructs across settings, they reveal relatively little about the multiple forms, meanings and consequences of SH in specific organizational contexts (Handy 2006). Hence, surveys should be complemented by qualitative research which considers more nuanced perspectives of the SH phenomenon, such as geographical and historical aspects, occupational experience, organizational cultures and individual and collective coping strategies. In-depth case studies are able to uncover individual decision-making processes related to whether certain behaviours are labelled as harassment and if, when and how targets report, or otherwise respond to them (Quinn 2002; Salzinger 2000). Williams (1997) also suggests that, where ambiguous or emerging forms of SH (e.g. 'cyber-SH', harassment targeted at gays or lesbians, female to male SH) should be uncovered, ethnographic methods rather than surveys are more appropriate.

Cross-sectional studies have also proliferated at the expense of longitudinal research which could yield more nuanced understandings of how SH manifests across the life-course. Welsh (1999), for example, suggests that SH often represents a turning point in the lives of targets, altering their progression through life-course sequences and hindering positive work and family outcomes. However, we know relatively little of these pathways, such as whether targets make decisions about subsequent employment on the basis of their experiences, the wider and longer-term impacts on personal and familial relationships, and the likelihood of being a target in the future.

The literature on SH provides compelling evidence for understanding broader notions of the origins, manifestations and promotion of gender equality in the workplace (Zippel 2006). Workplace SH is problematic in a unique and corrosive way in that it strips away an individual's identity, reduces the quality of working life, creates barriers to full and equal participation in the workplace and imposes costs on organizations (Fredman 1997; McCann 2005). However, equal employment opportunity or gender equity has gradually receded from policy and political discourse, sliding from a substantive understanding of equality of result, to an understanding of equality as 'strictly equal treatment' (Charlesworth 2006). Hence, while structural reforms and policy initiatives designed to redress inequities and promote opportunities in the labour market are critical, there is an imperative for future research to identify effective workplace actions which prevent the wider range of unfavourable and discriminatory acts that fall within, and under, the legislative radar.

Perhaps the most challenging yet fundamentally important task for researchers in providing evidence-based recommendations to effect real change is to bridge empirical studies addressing SH with research that explores other counterproductive workplace behavioural phenomenon (cultures, practices). As noted in this review, behaviours such as workplace bullying, mobbing, racial harassment and sex-based harassment, as well as SH, have hierarchical power relations at their core. These workplace phenomena also share important conceptual features such as the subjective perception of the target, the ambiguity of intent and the violation of organizational norms (Popovich and Warren 2010). To date, however, the boundaries of the literature which addresses SH are well-defined. With few exceptions, these different forms of negative workplace behaviours are examined separately in distinct non-overlapping literatures (Lopez *et al.* 2009). Bridging this conceptual research divide will build understandings of SH in the context of more general 'cultural misogyny' (Gailey and Prohaska 2006, p. 31) which sanctions destructive workplace behaviours and undermines broader equal opportunity in employment goals. Such research could also inform institution-wide conversations beyond the limits of formal policies, which are necessary to determine how behaviours are defined (legally, ethically, institutionally and personally) in the organization, how it should be addressed, and the implications for ignoring or normalizing it (Wear *et al.* 2007). The continued prevalence and

severity of workplace SH around the world clearly warrants such action.

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