

CHAPTER 3

Sexual Harassment: Not an Isolated Problem

Øystein Gullvåg Holter

University of Oslo

Lotta Snickare

University of Oslo

Abstract: Sexual Harassment: Not an Isolated Problem

Is sexual harassment in academia an isolated problem, or is it linked to the academic work environment and culture? Research at the Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Sciences in the University of Oslo supports the latter view. Results show how sexual harassment is associated with problematic features of the workplace organization, environment and culture. This is especially clear in the case of unwanted sexual attention, which is closely linked to professional devaluation and other problems. Other more serious forms (unwanted physical contact, coercion, stalking, assault) are less frequent, yet clearly associated with unwanted sexual attention. The chapter presents and analyzes sexual harassment data in view of other recent research, and discusses why this topic is important, and how research can be improved.

Keywords: sexual harassment, workplace environment, gender equality, academia

Introduction

Sexual harassment is still part of working life in the Nordic region, including academia. Disclosures and debates, for example in connection with the #MeToo movement, have uncovered an unpleasant reality in many countries, Norway included. However, sexual harassment is a relatively

Citation: Holter, Ø. G. & Snickare, L. (2022). Sexual harassment: Not an isolated problem. In Ø. G. Holter & L. Snickare (Eds.), *Gender equality in academia – from knowledge to change* (Ch. 3, pp. 81–106). Cappelen Damm Akademisk. <https://doi.org/10.23865/noasp.179.ch3>
Licence: CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

new research area, with little standardization of methods and definitions. Therefore, research estimates of the extent of sexual harassment vary greatly in different surveys (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2018; Feldblum & Lipnic, 2016). If the problem is defined strictly and narrowly, for example as clearly legally punishable cases only, the proportion of those reporting harassment falls, whereas it increases if the question is formulated more openly. Research on sexual harassment may be compared to research on bullying, which has been studied in Norway since the 1980s. In studies on bullying, there is now greater consensus on the definitions of bullying, and thus also greater agreement in studies reporting its extent.

All through its different definitions, research shows that women are more exposed to sexual harassment than men, and that young age increases the chance of exposure (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; KI et al., 2022; McDonald & Charlesworth, 2016). On the individual level, the consequences of sexual harassment have been described as “systemic trauma” (Fitzgerald, 2017), which includes depression, burnout, and other negative health effects (Henning et al., 2017; McDonald, 2012; Sojo et al., 2016). Negative consequences for women’s careers have also been documented, such as women withdrawing from positions (Henning et al., 2017; McLaughlin et al., 2017). On the whole, sexual harassment also has negative consequences for organizations, such as higher absence rates and turnover, and lower productivity (Henning et al., 2017; Gettman & Gelfand, 2007).

In this chapter, we not only describe the extent and degree of sexual harassment in the organization we investigate, the Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Sciences in the University of Oslo, but also the circumstances and conditions linked to it. We first asked about “unwanted sexual attention” without narrowing it down to “harassment”. We then followed up with four detailed questions on: unwanted physical contact; pressure to go on “dates” or perform sexual favours; stalking; and physical assaults. This comprises a sufficiently detailed approach so as to include grey zones and cases of doubt.

Our material is considerably broader and more detailed than surveys focusing on sexual harassment usually are. It contains 190 variables on career development, work environment, academic culture,

and social background. We can thus analyze the relationship between sexual harassment and a wide range of conditions within the organization, such as work environment, culture, and experiences of different forms of discrimination. In the interview material, we also have descriptions of sexual harassment supporting and nuancing the quantitative material.

We begin the chapter by describing background and method of the study moving on to the extent of sexual harassment compared to the two other types of harassment – bullying and racist harassment – asked about in the survey of employees at the faculty. We then demonstrate how sexual harassment is connected to a number of other features relating to the work environment and culture. We address who is behind the sexual harassment, and descriptions of “acceptance” of harassment in the interview material. Finally, we discuss our results in light of other research.

Background: Material and Method

What is sexual harassment? What is unwanted sexual attention? When concepts are new and disputed, the chances of obtaining good information through questionnaire surveys or interviews may be reduced. However, new concepts such as “unwanted sexual attention” may also reveal *more* information. They might capture something that has previously been unspoken. This is relevant, for example based on debates and research on “grey zones” connected to sexual harassment, sexual violence, and rape (Bitsch & Kruse, 2012; Thoresen & Hjemdal, 2014; Vislie, 2015). When it comes to rape, the legal system often emphasizes the “worst” cases.¹ But these are often related to slightly less clear cases, or grey zones, that also often include many more cases than the most serious ones (Bitsch, 2018; Helseth & Sletteland, 2018; Madsen et al., 2005). It is therefore important to expand the exploration of sexual harassment in order to include not just the most serious cases. In other words, a narrow interpretation of sexual harassment is not only oriented more towards the “worst cases” than towards average cases, it also provides poorer (and perhaps misleading) information on context and broader connections – what the

phenomenon as a whole is related to. If we include “milder” cases, we will know more about conditions that create harassment.

Qualitative studies of sexual assaults and harassment demonstrate the importance of this open approach. The expression “unwanted sexual attention” was used in a pioneering Norwegian study back in 1992, where it was defined as an “invasion and attack on one’s integrity” (Brantsæter & Widerberg, 1992, p. 25). The ERAC Standing Working Group on Gender Research and Innovation applies a similar definition of sexual harassment, that is “unwanted verbal, nonverbal, or physical conduct of a sexual nature, such as touching, comments on a person’s looks or body, stalking, the sending of images with sexual content or sexual jokes,” while they define sexual assault as “action of a sexual nature regulated in law, such as rape or attempted rape” (GRI, S. 2020 pp. 14–15).

A consistent result from studies of sexual harassment is that the problems are surrounded by taboos and silence, often with a large amount of shame, guilt and denial among the victims, including what is referred to as “identification with the abuser”, among both male and female victims (Andersen, 2009). Tendencies of denial – “she wanted it herself” – are also well known from studies of assailants. The harassment becomes, as a tendency, interpreted as “normal” and mutual attraction (Ø. Holter, 1981, 2013; Ringheim, 1987). According to Husu (2001), sexual harassment in academia has, through various processes, become legitimized and normalized. It has become part of an academic culture, and therefore invisible.

In Norway as well as other countries, the #MeToo movement became a signal for more research, including survey mapping. In Norway, the signal was interpreted differently by different actors, however. Institutions, now facing requirements to uncover the main problem, favoured a “narrow” model, mapping the scope of sexual harassment, defined strictly. The legal aspect also aimed at uncovering the “worst” or clearly illegal cases. On the other hand, researchers mostly favoured a “broad” model, with more extensive details and context questions in the surveys. Discussions in the higher education sector led to a national scope survey in 2019 (Ipsos, 2019). The survey showed that the problem is relevant to the entire sector, and helped to justify the need for measures, including improved systems

of reporting, even though it was narrowly designed. By focusing only on harassment, and omitting the question of unwanted sexual attention, the problem was underreported (Ø. Holter & Zachariassen, 2019).²

Underlying issues in this discussion are: the question of *doing something* about the problems here and now, and *preventing* problems of sexual harassment in the long run. Both are important, and they are not necessarily conflicting. A “narrow” mapping can be an important first step followed by “broader”, more detailed research. This is our point of departure. It is also important to point out that there is a long road ahead, and many challenges in this area. Even the most narrow scope surveys of sexual harassment show considerably higher figures than what emerges through whistleblower systems in institutions (Ipsos, 2019; Universitets- og høyskolerådet, 2019). In other words, students and employees disclose much more in an anonymous questionnaire survey than is actively reported.

Three Forms of Harassment That Affect Each Other

Our data on sexual harassment are primarily taken from a questionnaire survey³ with a broad set of variables relating to, among others, career development, work environment, academic culture, and social background. In the survey, we asked about sexual harassment, bullying, and racist harassment. In the two latter cases, we were not able to follow up through detailed questions, as we did with sexual harassment, but we wanted to include these topics too, based on the principle of incorporating important variables and problems in the work environment and culture. Bullying is further described in Chapter 5, and racist harassment in Chapter 6. Here, we will briefly describe the three types of harassment together. The questions concerning harassment were not time-limited, for example “experiences in the past year” and the like, and thus the figures are not directly comparable to time-limited questions in other surveys.

In the survey, approximately one in five employees mention problems with bullying or harassment.⁴ The proportion is largest among women:

25 per cent of women and 12 per cent of men have experienced bullying or harassment. These figures involve problems at the Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Sciences in the University of Oslo. The proportion is even larger if we also include those who checked two other alternatives: problems experienced at another academic institution, or in another line of work. The figures are quite similar if we look at academic and administrative employees separately. Women report problems approximately twice as often as men. Results indicate that problems occur across position categories (and workplaces/units), and that the gender pattern is fairly similar among academic and administrative employees.

Bullying and sexual harassment are the most widespread harassment problems in the study. In the faculty, 14 per cent of the women and 10 per cent of the men have experienced bullying, 12 per cent of the women and 3 per cent of the men have experienced sexual harassment, and 5 per cent of the women and 3 per cent of the men have experienced racist harassment. The figures show that a number of those who said they had experienced harassment had experienced several types of harassment. The tendency is that women experience problems more often than men – here as well as in other areas (see Chapter 5). The gender difference is particularly large in relation to sexual harassment.

A Broader Spectrum: Unwanted Sexual Attention

In order to capture the phenomenon of sexual harassment as a whole, and to avoid underreporting, we began, as mentioned, with a broad definition. In the questionnaire, we first asked about unwanted sexual attention. We then followed up with four detailed questions on: unwanted physical contact; pressure to go on “dates” or perform sexual favours; stalking; and physical assault.

Results show that unwanted sexual attention is considerably more widespread than the four other types. In the faculty, 7 per cent had experienced unwanted sexual attention, and 3 per cent had experienced unwanted physical contact.⁵ Slightly less than 1 per cent had experienced pressure to perform sexual favours, and 0,2 per cent had experienced physical assault. Among the 843 participants, 7 per cent had

experienced unwanted sexual attention at the MN faculty, 5 per cent in other academic workplaces, and 5 per cent in other jobs. Of those who had experienced unwanted sexual attention in the faculty, 21 per cent had also experienced this in other academic workplaces.

Most of those who have experienced unwanted physical contact have also experienced unwanted sexual attention. This proves that the more serious types of sexual harassment, such as unwanted physical contact, are strongly associated with unwanted sexual attention. One of the main results of our study is that serious harassment, including physical assault, is relatively rare, whereas unwanted sexual attention is fairly common. 12 per cent of the women and 3 per cent of the men have reported experiences of unwanted sexual attention. However, the study shows that unwanted sexual attention increases the chance of more serious sexual harassment.

Sexual Harassment Is Not an Isolated Problem

In the survey, we explore experiences of academic devaluation through several questions and statements, such as “I constantly feel/felt under scrutiny/judged by my colleagues/peers.” Such negative academic attention is, surprisingly, strongly associated with unwanted sexual attention. Those who have experienced unwanted sexual attention have an approximately 60 per cent greater chance of experiencing negative academic attention, compared to those who have not experienced unwanted sexual attention. This applies to all employees. Among the academic employees, this connection is even stronger. Here, those who have been exposed to unwanted sexual attention have more than twice the chance of experiencing negative academic attention.

Is this a pattern that varies by gender? The figures are small, particularly for men, but as far as we can see, the pattern is more or less the same for both genders. If we include everyone who has experienced unwanted sexual attention at the faculty, not just women, we see a fairly similar picture compared with analyses of just women.

Also, those who had been exposed to unwanted sexual attention often report other problems in the work environment, in addition to negative

academic attention. They experience less often that their scholarly contributions are valued, that they fit in, and that they have role models. They are more worried about addressing problems at work. For example, the proportion agreeing with the statement, “I have the feeling that my contribution to the department is valued,” was only 36 per cent among those who had been exposed to unwanted sexual attention, compared with 61 per cent among those who had not experienced this. The chance of feeling valued was also nearly half in the exposed group. In relation to the statement, “I have the feeling that I ‘fit in’ easily within my department,” 44 per cent in the exposed group agreed, compared with 64 per cent among the rest. In other words, the exposed group only had a 67 per cent chance of feeling that they fit in compared with the rest.

We do not know what is cause and what is effect in this picture. It might be that most reporting of unwanted sexual attention is a causal factor in relation to reporting other features of the culture in the unit. One can imagine that several different conditions come into play, for example: some are more exposed than others; some environments are more characterized by problems than others; and some respondents are more critical or have a higher tendency to report negative experiences. We will return to this in the discussion.

What we can say with certainty is that there are clear and significant connections between unwanted sexual attention on the one hand, and various forms of academic devaluation on the other. The pattern is clear across the six variables mentioned above, and it also emerges for other variables.

Are these results also valid when we control for other conditions? Multivariable analyses of the most important variables associated with unwanted sexual attention show that gender appears as the strongest associated variable.⁶ Next on the list is a more critical assessment of the culture in the unit (more sexism, less respect, openness and transparency), and that women experience support and encouragement less often.

In order to acquire more insight into this, we also analyzed possible “causes”, defined more strictly – class, ethnicity, supervisor’s gender, and a few others – and restricted the analysis to women. The supervisor’s gender entered the picture rather weakly. One can imagine that a

male supervisor would increase the chances for unwanted sexual attention, but this is very weak and not clearly significant. The other factors did not show any clear association. The most interesting part is, perhaps, what the analyses did *not* show. Neither of the two variables for ethnicity (family background, nationality) had any clear association with unwanted sexual attention. Neither did the parents' level of education seem to matter.

The results of our analyses generally confirm that the problem dimension is relatively independent of ethnicity and class, but strongly linked to gender.

Figure 3.1 (below) summarizes how unwanted sexual attention is connected to other variables in the work environment and academic culture.

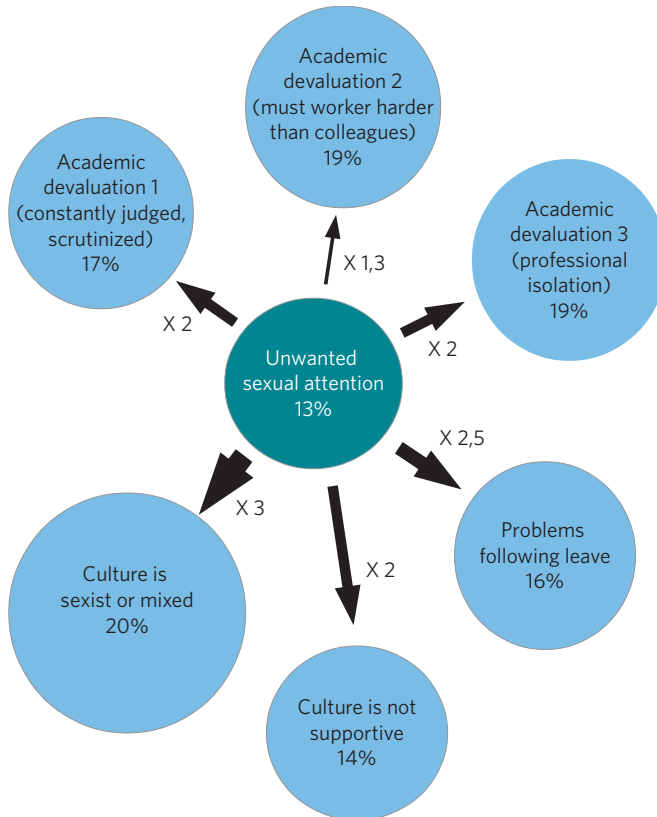


Figure 3.1. Associations Between Unwanted Sexual Attention and Other Variables. Source: FRONT Employee survey (N = 843).

The figure shows the associations between unwanted sexual attention and other variables.⁷ The circle size roughly depicts the extent of the problem among respondents (also given in percentages). The thickness of the arrows represents the association between unwanted sexual attention and the other variables. The text below the arrows, for example, X 2, means that the chance of having experienced other problems is approximately twice as large in the group having experienced unwanted sexual attention, compared with those not having experienced this. Arrows are used to indicate a likely causal chain, but we do not know this for certain.⁸

In the survey, we asked about 12 different conditions related to the work environment. We found clear connections between important conditions related to the environment and unwanted sexual attention. The analyses showed four important factors, as shown in Figure 3.2 (below).⁹

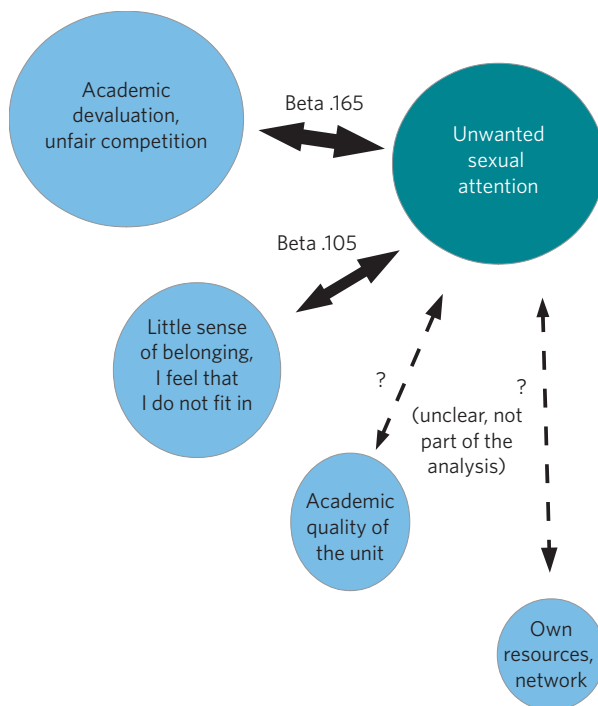


Figure 3.2. How Four Work Environment Factors Are Associated with Unwanted Sexual Attention. Source: FRONT Employee survey (N = 843).

Figure 3.2 shows the main features relating to unwanted sexual attention.¹⁰ The result is clear. Two factors in particular are linked to unwanted sexual attention. The main factor is an organizational culture that incorporates a lot of negative assessment, in which some have to work harder than others in order to be recognized. The other factor is that one does not feel at home or does not fit in. This factor is also very typical. The other two factors are more uncertain (dotted lines), and probably less important. They are not included in the analysis because the association becomes uncertain when the first two factors are taken into consideration. The unit or environment's academic quality seems to matter relatively little, and the same applies to one's own resources, for example one's own research networks.

Who Is Behind the Harassment?

In addition to asking about types of harassment, we asked who is behind this – leaders, supervisors, colleagues or students. The distribution of responses regarding sexual harassment largely resembles the two other types of harassment (bullying, racist harassment). Colleagues are most frequently involved. But there are also some important differences. In Figure 3.3, we see how different groups are involved in bullying and unwanted sexual attention.

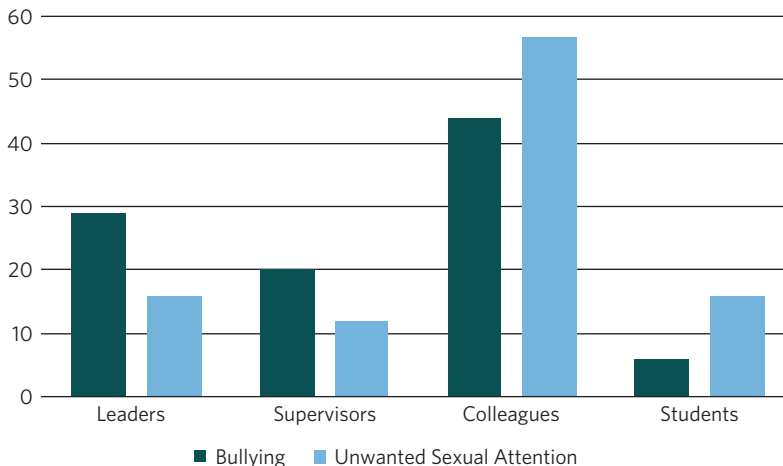


Figure 3.3. Who Is Reported to Be Behind Bullying and Unwanted Sexual Attention, by Main Group. The responses are given as percentages among those who have experienced the problem. Source: FRONT Employee survey (N = 843).

The figure shows percentages among those who report experiences of bullying and unwanted sexual attention in terms of who harassed them. Almost 60 per cent of those reporting unwanted sexual attention say that colleagues were involved.

We see that bullying is a more “vertical” dimension than unwanted sexual attention, which is more “horizontal”. In other words – leaders and supervisors are more clearly in the picture in relation to bullying, whereas colleagues and students are more clearly involved in unwanted sexual attention. There is thus a considerable similarity in the “perpetrator” profile for the two types of harassment, but also a clear difference.¹¹

On the whole, we see that harassment – based on the groups behind it – provides a picture strengthening the impression that the problem is not an isolated one. It occurs across different groups. Leaders, colleagues and others are involved. Since we do not know very much about the overall degree of contact within these groups – leaders, supervisors, colleagues and students – neither do we know much about whether any of the groups are overrepresented. That colleagues appear vividly in the picture may be interpreted to suggest that this represents the main part of professional contact (rather than that this group is overrepresented). Leaders are perhaps somewhat more strongly represented, especially in terms of bullying, and students somewhat more weakly (again, especially in bullying) than one might have expected. We do not know. What becomes clear is that the problem arises from negative interactions between people in all groups – leaders, supervisors, colleagues and students.

Some Harassment Must Be Accepted

No. No. N ... no. No ... I mean, that [laughter] is a bit difficult, but that, we had one professor, an old professor, in our department who was, but it was something that everybody knew, that he could be a little like ... not that much ... he was just very, like, hugging and stuff [laughter], but of course it's ... so there were stories about it and things, but that is like ... yeah, it is almost like a cliché. But it's, yeah. It hasn't [laughter] deprived me of any sleep, it's more like, OK, I'll move away from there [laughter].

(Siri, a female postdoctoral fellow)

We have relatively few examples of stories of harassment from the interviews. Nor did we ask systematically about this, as we did in the employee survey. Therefore, the problems emerge more clearly, and to a greater extent, in the quantitative than in the qualitative material. In the interviews, descriptions of sexual harassment sometimes came up when we asked about the environment of the workplace or about experiences of discrimination, but the interviews were not a detailed mapping of sexual harassment.

The interviews in which harassment does appear nevertheless describe an organizational culture strongly signalling that some types of harassment must be accepted. In the introductory quote to this section, Siri, a female postdoctoral fellow, describes the harassment type of unwanted physical contact. Siri is careful to point out that she could handle the situation. She was not afraid of the older male professor. The fact that he embraced and touched the younger female colleagues was something everybody knew about, something that happened regularly, nothing harmful. The women were expected to be able to act in an appropriate manner, by pretending that nothing is going on and move away.

Marianne, a female postdoctoral fellow, says that she was threatened by students on two different occasions. She is alone in a room with a student and afraid of not being able to leave the room: “He doesn’t touch me, but it was a horrible experience, and ... yeah. He ... yeah, he said a lot of things, he yelled, he began to” On the other occasion, she is with a group of students and feels that she, as a lecturer, is responsible for everybody’s safety: “And he is standing, he is banging his fist on the table, yelling, ‘You, woman, you bla, bla, bla, bla, bla,’ and it was like ... so I tried to say ... OK, that’s enough now, we will address this in another meeting. [...] He doesn’t want to leave the room, so” Marianne feels that the organization’s focus when handling the situation is that the students have their exam. They are given new supervisors and other exam forms. “I do realize that it has administrative consequences, but it also has ... I don’t know, personnel consequences, and there must be a person handling this.”

Marianne begins her description of the incident by saying, “Yeah, I’ve completely forgotten this.” She continues, “No, because at the weekend,

on Sunday, I don't know what ... I did not think about our meeting or anything, suddenly I'm back in a situation I was in here at the department, which I fortunately, or I believe there will be many such things, we do it often, women and men, if we have such experiences, that we place them somewhere else." Marianne describes how she has placed the experience "somewhere else". It was so unpleasant that she does not want to remember it.

That "we have such experiences, that we place them somewhere else," is an appropriate summary of a tendency in the interview material, in line with research on underreporting – and with the picture that emerged in the questionnaire survey. When we ask systematically about different forms of harassment in an anonymous survey, the threshold for reporting is lower. When we, in the interviews, do not ask directly about experiences of sexual harassment, few participants address the topic.

Discussion

In 2019, a survey of bullying and harassment among employees in the higher education sector in Norway was conducted (Ipsos, 2019). The response rate was somewhat higher among women than among men, similar to our survey, and the total response rate (42) was also similar. The results showed that 13 per cent had experienced bullying and harassment, whereas 2 per cent had experienced sexual harassment during the past 12 months. Women experienced bullying more often than men (14 compared with 10 per cent). Figures from the University of Oslo were roughly in line with the national average (Ipsos, 2019). Although the questions in the survey were time-limited to "the past 12 months", the figures for bullying correspond with the results in the FRONT study. However, the definition of sexual harassment was much narrower in the 2019 survey. For example, they did not ask about unwanted sexual attention, which makes it difficult to compare their figures with ours. As mentioned, due to different standards and question formulations, mappings of sexual harassment provide widely varying figures for extent (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2018).

According to Norway's largest student survey SHoT (SHoT, 2018b, p. 24), which focuses on the social-psychological work environment,

including experiences of discrimination, the figures for sexual harassment among students is somewhat lower at the MN Faculty (19 per cent) compared with other faculties at UiO. The social sciences are at the top of the list (34 per cent), followed by law (32 per cent), education (30 per cent), the humanities (30 per cent), theology (26 per cent) and medicine (24 per cent). The figures indicate that the MN faculty is *less* characterized by sexual harassment than the other faculties. However, the figures are not distributed by gender, and since studies of academia show that women are more exposed than men (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020), the MN faculty's low score here is probably related to the lower proportion of women in the faculty. It is also possible to imagine that a certain "awareness factor" comes into play (such as more discussion of the topic in the social sciences). The threshold for reporting is an important factor with regard to harassment, and it might not be equally low in every discipline.

On the whole, the SHoT survey shows that 31 per cent of the women and 8 per cent of the men have been exposed to some kind of sexual harassment. The questions were formulated differently than in the FRONT survey, but the main tendency is the same: Women experience this roughly four times more often than men (SHoT, 2018, p. 87). It is particularly younger students who experience sexual harassment. An article from the SHoT project addresses a likely tendency for underreporting among men, documents significant health costs of harassment, and discusses methodological limitations, including low response rates (Sivertsen et al., 2019). To compare the results with other European countries, the ERAC Standing Working Group on Gender Research and Innovation estimates, based on a review of international studies, that 25% of female students in Europe experience gender-based violence during their time in the higher education sector (GRI, S., 2020). The concept of gender-based violence included gender harassment, sexual harassment, and sexual assault.

As mentioned, our questions on harassment are not limited in time, but apply to the participants' entire period at the faculty. Studies show that unwanted sexual attention and sexual harassment are strongly linked to gender (women) and age (young) (see e.g., Akademiet for yngre forskere, 2019; Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Ipsos, 2019; McDonald & Charlesworth, 2016; KI et al., 2022). We cannot directly test for age in our

study, since we do not ask when the problem occurred. Our results do not clearly demonstrate that young women are the most exposed. On the contrary, more senior women report as many or even more experiences of harassment. But since our questions were not time-limited, this may be because older women report “accumulated” experiences, and therefore come out higher, although the actual incidence rate is higher among younger women.

However, we have an indirect indication that part of the reporting for our question on unwanted sexual attention is not very far back in time. On the question of whether the culture in the department/unit is non-sexist, only 15 per cent of those who have experienced unwanted sexual attention *completely agree*, compared with 37 per cent of those who have not experienced this. On the other hand, 20 per cent of those who have experienced unwanted sexual attention *completely disagree* that the culture is non-sexist compared with only 4 per cent of those who have not experienced it. This may be interpreted to suggest persistent and not just obsolete problems.¹²

Sexual Attention and Negative Academic Attention

What is new in our results is that we are able to show that unwanted sexual attention is not an isolated problem, but is instead linked to other variables in the work environment. Of those who have experienced unwanted sexual attention, 37 per cent also report experiences of negative academic attention, compared with 15 per cent of those who have not experienced unwanted sexual attention. In other words, the chance of experiencing negative academic attention is approximately 2.5 times greater among those who have experienced negative sexual attention. This is not only a new, but also an astounding result, in light of the fact that unwanted sexual attention has been addressed only marginally in work environment surveys. However, the result is in line with other recent research on sexual and other types of harassment in working life. Harassment and other negative attention often go hand in hand, in that the person who is exposed to this is also devalued as a professional (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2018), and this often leads to general unhappiness and psychological problems

for those exposed (see e.g. Bråten & Øistad, 2017). Recently, a major Swedish study, with about 40,000 respondents from the higher education sector, shows that those who have experienced unwanted sexual attention report a lower degree of support from colleagues and leaders, poorer general health, higher stress levels, a higher degree of burnout, and they consider leaving their work or studies more often (KI et al., 2022).

In our study, the connection between sexual harassment and other conditions in the work environment and academic culture emerge in a comprehensive and systematic manner. We see that some features of the work environment play a particularly strong role. Among these are: professional devaluation, unfair competition, and the feeling of not fitting in. Unwanted sexual attention thus has a larger scope than is often assumed, and is thus connected to other variables that are more “normal” in everyday academic life, such as academic devaluation. The results confirm previous research relating to the many negative side effects of sexual harassment, and show that doubting one’s own abilities is part of the picture (e.g. Charney & Russell, 1994; Henning et al., 2017; McLaughlin et al., 2017).

Helseth (2020) is one of the researchers who summarizes #MeToo and the subsequent academic debate. She emphasizes that the results were shocking, also for researchers working in the field. Support was so great, with manifestoes from many different occupational groups, from actors to medical students – and much of it revolved around very serious transgressions. Many stories that were not previously known emerged. According to surveys, it is estimated that approximately one in ten women in Norway have been exposed to unwanted sexual acts (Thoresen & Hjemdal, 2014). Rape is part of this broader scope. Research aims to include more of the grey areas, and acquire more information about them. Underreporting is widespread.

“It has to do with what you want to admit to yourself that you have been part of,” Helseth maintains (2020), claiming that underreporting is even more widespread in terms of what one has exposed others to – being the abuser or assailant is even more of a taboo. “We lack a language for this,” she claims. Many have crossed lines at one time or another: “We have to normalize this without trivializing it. Many make mistakes now

and then when it comes to flirting. The difference is those who keep pushing and do not respect that the other party is not into it.”

Research on flirting and sexual attraction demonstrates a complicated and often subtle interaction, traditionally characterized by different gender roles and a structural inequality in relation to what each gender offers and seeks (see e.g., Ø. Holter, 1981, 1990). Nevertheless, ordinary flirting or dating has the character of an equal meeting. Unwanted sexual attention differs from flirting, according to our material – it is perceived as unpleasant and offensive.

Studies of various forms of harassment and bullying began, naturally enough, with information from those who had been exposed to it (see e.g., Sætre et al., 1986). Research might take the form of a list of problems, “Have you been exposed to any of these?”. This is important, at least as a first phase. But if we look at the matter from a preventive perspective, information about assailants is just as important. One goal is to reduce the damage, but an overarching goal is to reduce the *cause* of the damage. Here, research on harassment in academia has come up relatively short. Research on men’s violence against women indicates that many men who have used such violence later change their behaviour, whereas others develop a regular pattern (Ø. Holter, 2013; Råkil, 2002). Sexual harassment is probably an area with even more grey zones than violence. It is therefore possible that quite a few men (and some women) are involved in “unwanted sexual attention” as assailants, but mostly in camouflaged and subtle forms, while only a small proportion progress towards sexual assault through physical contact, coercion and so on. Here we need more research.

Features of Organizations That Increase the Chance of Sexual Harassment

Research shows that the chance of exposure to sexual harassment is greater in some occupations than in others. Physical contact and close personal contact increase the chances. Actors and service personnel are more exposed. The same applies to alcohol in job contexts (Bråten & Øistad, 2017). These are nevertheless “external” factors. Good jobs and

workplaces can probably involve both (some) physical contact, and (some) alcohol without necessarily involving more harassment. What is decisive are the “internal” factors – work environment and culture. Highest on the list here is equality or a low degree of power relations, security, and the opportunity to speak up.

“Culture” has become more visible, also in institutions’ attempts to prevent sexual harassment. There is a desire to change the culture, not just reduce damage. But if we are to change the culture, we need to know how it actually works. It is not sufficient to register only the “worst” cases of harassment. We must include the setting – the environment, culture, context – and the grey areas too. This is an important argument for using a broad definition of sexual harassment as a basis, and not just criminal cases. As we have seen, the grey zone of “unwanted sexual attention” provides new and vital information both as to the extent of the problems and how they are connected to other variables.

Academia does not necessarily score high on factors like physical contact. But it scores high on “close personal contact”, for example between a supervisor and a PhD student, and other structural features that may increase the chance of sexual harassment. This has to do with a strong and unequal power balance between levels (such as the supervisor/PhD student relationship), major insecurity relating to one’s job situation, and a high degree of competition. Both power and insecurity play significant roles. Often, it also has to do with individual relationships not being open to the surroundings, for instance in small academic communities. All of this may help explain why the proportion experiencing unwanted sexual attention and other forms of sexual harassment can become relatively high in academia, even when other factors might perhaps not indicate this (e.g., Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2018, 2020; Henning et al., 2017; MacDonald, 2012; O’Connor et al., 2021).

In an overview of recent studies of sexual harassment in Norway, Jardim et al. (2022) found tendencies similar to those in the FRONT material, such as much higher rates among women than men, as well as higher rates among younger than older respondents. In addition, a considerable variation between occupations indicates the importance of the work culture, as well as the character of the work. Hotel/restaurant staff,

nurses and health workers, journalists and media employees, and military employees were among the groups having the highest incidence of sexual harassment (p. 15). Some groups, like health workers, reported that most of the harassment came from patients/users, while other groups, such as journalists and military employees, reported that it came mainly from colleagues or leaders (p. 20). The consequences of harassment appeared most serious in the hotel/restaurant industry and the health services. Men are the main problem factor in all sectors. Men are the assailants in four out of five cases of sexual harassment in academia (Jardim et al., 2022, pp. 15, 20, 23).

Some researchers have argued that increased attention to sexual harassment in the wake of #MeToo has not resulted in an equally increased theoretical understanding. The causal conditions are still unclear. In a retrospective view of the Norwegian study by Brantsæter and Widerberg from 1992, Widerberg (2020, p. 84) writes that “our understanding holds true also today. #MeToo does not express a different or better understanding of sexual harassment than the one we arrived at, perhaps rather the contrary. In our book, we dig deep in order to understand all varieties of experiences and reactions. Maybe it was due to this complexity, but also the image of society’s “highly” patriarchal structure, that we did not reach a wider audience back then.”

In this chapter, we have concentrated primarily on *connections* (associations), not empirical data or theories of the *causes* of harassment. In her 1992 study, Harriet Holter (1992) postulated three main types of causes of harassment. These could be on the level of social actors, where unwanted sexual attention rendered women invisible as equal colleagues, while they were simultaneously visible as gender (H. Holter, 1992, p. 131). But in addition to such actor-power, often linked to “domination techniques” (see Chapter 2; Holter, 1976), another cause of harassment could include hierarchical and structural power. Hierarchical power is often open, between position levels (and professional levels in academic prestige hierarchies), whereas structural power is more hidden and indirect. “Structural power is incorporated into social systems in such a way that one cannot identify specific people as exercisers of power” (H. Holter, 1992, p. 135). “Organizations present themselves, and are perceived, as

gender neutral “shells” that are not themselves responsible for being gendered in such a way that they are systems of male power” (H. Holter, 1992, p. 140).

Our results reflect this interpretation as still being relevant. Harassment has to do with actors, but also with hierarchies and structures. In part two of this book, we discuss further how such neutral structures may contribute to a gender gap in academic experiences.

Conclusion

Our study shows that sexual harassment is still an extensive problem. Moreover, it shows how sexual harassment is clearly connected to other conditions in academia – such as work organization, culture, and environment. Among the respondents, unwanted sexual attention is linked to academic devaluation and outsidership. Furthermore, we see that unwanted sexual attention is the most widespread type of sexual harassment, whereas other and (usually) more serious forms, such as unwanted physical contact, coercion, stalking, and physical assault, are less prevalent. However, most of those who have experienced more serious types of sexual harassment have also experienced unwanted sexual attention. The five forms of sexual harassment for which we have data are connected and form a pattern.

The occurrence of unwanted sexual attention is much higher among women than among men. This also applies to the other forms of sexual harassment. This is known from previous studies. However, we also see a new, clear pattern – less well-known. Results show a strong connection between unwanted sexual attention and academic devaluation, and deprecation in various forms. In other words, sexual harassment is not “isolated” or “unique”. It is part of an overall pattern.

The fact that the proportion who have experienced one or several types of harassment is so high (1 in 4 women, 1 in 5 among all respondents), and that harassment is so strongly connected to other conditions of environment and culture, is a refutation of the idea that this problem applies to only a few, and represents isolated incidents, in which unwanted sexual attention involves a few very special cases.

By identifying problem factors, our study also leads to the possibility of organizational and cultural change. The fact that the problems are closely connected to environment and culture makes it possible to improve the situation, precisely through measures in these areas. More openness with regard to sexuality, a more comprehensive understanding of problems relating to gender and gender equality, along with low-threshold systems for reporting and conflict resolution tackling problems before they develop further, can all be elements of such an approach.

The extent of sexual harassment and its connection to academic devaluation emphasizes the need to work against imbalance and gender discrimination, and raise awareness of the importance of gender equality in academic institutions. Systematic work over time is needed to change an environment and culture in which harassment still occurs. Improved research and a more systematic knowledge base are central to this work. Further research may build on the breadth of our study, in which sexual harassment is investigated in terms of career development, environment and culture, and at the same time develop the level of detail. It can study connections between various forms of harassment, and monitor changes over time.

References

- Akademiet for yngre forskere. (2019). *Rom for mangfold i akademia? En surveyundersøkelse om internasjonalisering, diskriminering og seksuell trakassering blant yngre forskere i Norge*. <https://akademietforyngreforskere.no/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Rom-for-mangfold-i-akademia-En-rapport-fra-Akademiet-for-yngre-forskere-2019.pdf>
- Andersen, T. H. (2009). *Sårbar og sterk. Menn som har vært utsatt for seksuelle overgrep i oppveksten. En kvalitativ studie av sosiale og kulturelle faktorerers innvirkning på virkelighetsskaping og mestring* [Doctoral dissertation, Norges teknisk-naturvitenskapelige universitet]. NTNU Open. <http://hdl.handle.net/11250/267681>
- Bitsch, A. (2018). *Voldtektens geografi. En studie av den rettslige forvaltningen av seksuelt medborgerskap i Norge* [Doctoral dissertation]. Universitetet i Oslo. https://1aac0183-f5f2-4d86-8622-aaad6d63edc4.filesusr.com/ugd/d77590_529fa917d11e4e6284b50bc8bdf52aao.pdf

- Bitsch, A. & Kruse, A. E. (2012). *Bak lukkede dører: En bok om voldtekt*. Cappelen Damm.
- Bondestam, F. & Lundqvist, M. (2020). Sexual harassment in higher education: A systematic review. *European Journal of Higher Education*, 10(4), 397–419. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21568235.2020.1729833>
- Bondestam, F. & Lundqvist, M. (2018). *Sexuella trakasserier i akademien – en internationell översikt*. Vetenskapsrådet. <https://www.vr.se/analys/rapporter/vara-rapporter/2018-10-15-sexuella-trakasserier-i-akademien.html>
- Brantsæter, M. & Widerberg, K. (Eds.). (1992). *Sex i arbeid(et) i Norge*. Tiden.
- Bråten, M. & Øistad, B. S. (2017). *Seksuell trakassering i arbeidslivet. Undersøkelse blant Fellesforbundets medlemmer i hotell og restaurant og Fagforbundets medlemmer i helse og omsorg* (Fafo-rapport 2017:9). <https://www.fafo.no/images/pub/2017/20617.pdf>
- Charney, D. A. & Russell, R. C. (1994). An overview of sexual harassment. *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, 151(1), 10–17. <https://doi.org/10.1176/ajp.151.1.10>
- Cochran, C. C., Frazier, P. A. & Olson, A. M. (1997). Predictors of responses to unwanted sexual attention. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 21(2), 207–226. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-6402.1997.tb00109.x>
- Feldblum, C. & Lipnic, V. (2016). *Select Task Force on the Study of Harassment in the Workplace (Full Report)*. U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. https://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/task_force/harassment/upload/report.pdf
- Fitzgerald, L. F. (2017). Still the last great open secret: Sexual harassment as systemic trauma. *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation*, 18(4), 483–489. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15299732.2017.1309143>
- Gettman, H. J. & Gelfand, M. J. (2007). When the customer shouldn't be king: Antecedents and consequences of sexual harassment by clients and customers. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 92(3), 757–770. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.92.3.757>
- GRI, S. (2020). Sexual harassment and higher education: National policies and measures in EU member states. *ERAC Standing Working Group on Gender Research and Innovation*. https://genderaction.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/SWGGRI_Sexual-Harassment-in-the-Research-Higher-Ed.-National-Policies-Measures.pdf
- Henning, M. A., Zhou, C., Adams, P., Moir, F., Hobson, J., Hallett, C. & Webster, C. S. (2017). Workplace harassment among staff in higher education: A systematic review. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, (18), 521–539.
- Helseth, H. & Sletteland, A. (2018). *Det jeg skulle sagt – håndbok mot seksuell trakassering*. Forlaget Manifest.
- Helseth, H. (2020). Metoo oppsummert [Podcast with Tore Sagen]. *NRK radio*. https://radio.nrk.no/podkast/tore_sagens_podkast/l_c7bcfccd-ec10-404a-bcfc-cdec10504aee

- Holter, H. (1992). Seksuell trakassering: En hersketeknikk i arbeidsorganisasjonen? In M. Brantsæter & K. Widerberg (Eds.), *Sex i arbeid(et) i Norge* (pp. 130–145). Tiden.
- Holter, Ø. G. (1981). *Sjekking, kjærlighet og kjønnsmarked*. Pax.
- Holter, Ø. G. (1990). Kjærlighet i forandring – endring i makevalg 1973–1985. *Tidsskrift for samfunnsforskning*, 31, 125–146.
- Holter, Ø. G. (2013). Masculinities, gender equality and violence. *Masculinities and Social Change*, 2(1), 51–81. <https://www.hipatiapress.com/hpjournals/index.php/mcs/article/download/498/pdf>
- Holter, Ø. G. & Zachariassen, H. H. (2019, 12 December). Uvitenhetens makt – seksualitet og rettferdighet i akademia [Opinion article]. *Khrono*. <https://khrono.no/uvitenhetens-makt--seksualitet-og-rettferdighet-i-akademia/427186> [See also <http://kifinfo.no/nb/2019/12/uvitenhetens-makt-seksualitet-og-rettferdighet-i-akademia>]
- Husu, L. (2001). *Sexism, support and survival in academia: Academic women and hidden discrimination in Finland*. University of Helsinki.
- Ipsos. (2019). *Nasjonal rapport – mobbing og trakassering i universitets- og høyskolesektoren* [Report]. [https://khrono.no/files/2019/08/22/Nasjonal%20rapport%20-%20Mobbing%20og%20trakassering%20i%20UH-sektoren%202019%20\(1\).pdf](https://khrono.no/files/2019/08/22/Nasjonal%20rapport%20-%20Mobbing%20og%20trakassering%20i%20UH-sektoren%202019%20(1).pdf)
- Jardim, P. S. J., Gaustad, J. V., Langøien, L. J., Næss, G. E. (2022). Omfang av seksuell trakassering i Norge: En hurtigoversikt. [The prevalence of sexual harassment in Norway: A rapid review]. Folkehelseinstituttet, 2022. <https://www.fhi.no/publ/2022/omfang-av-seksuell-trakassering-i-norge/>
- KI Karolinska Institutet, KTH Kungliga Tekniska Högskolan, MAU Malmö Universitet & NSFG Nationella Sekretariatet för Genusforskning. (2022). *Enkätstudie om: Genusbaserad utsatthet och sexuella trakasserier i svensk högskolesektor*. <https://ki.se/media/246914/download>
- Madsen, S. A., Kaster, M., Holter, Ø. G., Nielsen, M. L. & Schei, B. (2005). *Kønnets betydning i det professionelle arbeidet med ofre for voldtægt*. Psykologisk og Psykosocial Forskningsenhet, Rigshospitalet.
- McDonald, P. & Charlesworth, S. (2016). Workplace sexual harassment, workplace authority, and the paradox of power. *American Sociological Review*, 77(4), 625–647. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122412451728>
- McDonald, P. (2012). Workplace sexual harassment 30 Years on: A review of the literature. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, (14), 1–17.
- McLaughlin, H., Uggen, C. & Blackstone, A. (2017). The economic and career effects of sexual harassment on working women. *Gender & Society*, 31(3), 333–358. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243217704631>

- O'Connor, P., Hodgins, M., Woods, D. R., Wallwaey, E., Palmen, R., Van Den Brink, M., & Schmidt, E. K. (2021). Organisational characteristics that facilitate gender-based violence and harassment in higher education. *Administrative Sciences*, 11(4), 138.
- Ringheim, G. (1987). *Menn som voldtar*. Cappelen.
- Råkil, M. (Ed.). (2002). *Menns vold mot kvinner – behandlingserfaringer og kunnskapsstatus*. Aschehoug.
- SHoT. (2018). *Studentens helse- og trivselsundersøkelse* [report]. <https://www.uio.no/studier/om/laringsmiljo/shot/index.html>
- SHoT. (2018b). *Studentens helse- og trivselsundersøkelse: Universitetet i Oslo*. <https://www.uio.no/for-ansatte/arbeidsstotte/sta/undersokelser/shot/rapportene/uiotall-shot-2018.pdf>
- Sivertsen, B., Nielsen, M. B., Madsen, I. E. H., Knapstad, M., Lønning, K. J. & Hysing, M. (2019). Sexual harassment and assault among university students in Norway: A cross-sectional prevalence study. *BMJ Open*, 9(6). <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2018-026993>
- Sojo, V. E., Wood, R. E. & Genat, A. E. (2016). Harmful workplace experiences and women's occupational well-being: A meta-analysis. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 40(1), 10–40. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684315599346>
- Sætre, M., Holter, H. & Jebsen, E. (1986). *Tvang til seksualitet – en undersøkelse av seksuelle overgrep mot barn*. Cappelen.
- Thoresen, S. & Hjemdal, O. K. (Eds.). (2014). *Vold og voldtekt i Norge. En nasjonal forekomststudie av vold i et livsløpsperspektiv*. Nasjonalt kunnskapssenter om vold og traumatisk stress.
- Universitets- og høyskolerådet. (2019). *Rapport fra Arbeidsgruppen mot mobbing og trakassering i UH-sektoren (UHRMOT)*. <https://kifinfo.no/sites/default/files/rapportfrauhrmot.pdf>
- Vislie, C. (2015). *Nyanser av grått. En narrativ tilnærming til voldtekt og gråsonerfaringer*. [Master's thesis, Universitet i Oslo]. DUO vitenarkiv. <http://urn.nb.no/URN:NBN:no-50120>
- Widerberg, K. (2020). Fra #metoo til sex i arbeid(et). *Tidsskrift for kjønnsforskning*, 44(1), 80–86. <https://doi.org/10.18261/issn.1891-1781-2020-01-08>

Notes

- 1 According to Bitsch (2019), this tendency is linked to gender stereotypes in the legal system, and simply what types of cases are easiest to work with for lawyers, and are easiest to prove. In this chapter, we will not address the legal debate, such as consent legislation.
- 2 A similar criticism (of a too narrow definition of the problem) may be directed at the term often used internationally, “gender-based violence”, which is strongly focused on violence, but does not clearly include sexuality. The academic debate on how conditions may be mapped, and what

terms may be used (such as sexualized violence, offensive sexuality, and assault), has been ongoing in Norway since the 1980s (Sætre et al., 1986) and testifies both to different points of view and to a wide and partly diffuse area.

- 3 The questionnaire survey comprised 843 employees, and was conducted in 2018. The project material also consisted of a student survey, interviews and action research, described more closely in the appendix “Method”.
- 4 Such as “bullying/harassment” in the questionnaire form (without specifying the grounds for this).
- 5 The figures apply to the entire sample in the employee survey (N = 843).
- 6 The methods are described in more detail in the appendix “Method”.
- 7 The FRONT employee survey (N = 843) paired correlations.
- 8 The association may include cause and effect both ways, but this is probably the main direction (see Chapter 8). The analyses are bivariate, with correlation as a yardstick for association or possible connection in the material. The figures apply to the entire sample. For some variables, the associations are even stronger if we look only at the women in the sample.
- 9 Based on factor and regression analyses. The arrows represent associations in a regression analysis, in which the factors are controlled for each other. We first selected the 12 most important variables through pairwise correlation with unwanted sexual attention, then grouped the variables through factor analyses selecting a four-factor solution, and finally tested the solution through regression analysis (shown in the figure).
- 10 Regression analysis, standardized beta values.
- 11 Figures from the employee survey, all employees (N = 843).
- 12 We also have a certain indication of this based on multi-variable analyses.