

COMMENTARY

Sexual Harassment in Academic Sciences, Engineering and Medicine: A Report

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The growing incidence of sexual harassment in the United States in academia is alarming. More so, as an increasing number of women are entering various science, engineering and medical establishments as students and faculty. Given the increased incidence of sexual offences, the findings of this Report gain universal relevance, in STEM institutions in particular.

The organization of the content in the Report is intermittently repetitive yet neat. Defining what sexually harassing behavior is, forms the beginning of the Report. Then the Report describes the methodological challenges in gathering credible evidence to comprehend (i) the prevalence of sexual harassment experiences; (ii) experiences of sexual harassment among 'non-majority members of a given workplace or campus' (p. 33); (iii) legal remedies available, especially the hiatus between what law states and how people comprehend it; and, (iv) the characteristics of sexually harassing environments. An important chapter on 'organizational climate' discusses ways to determine whether sexual harassment is likely to occur in a work setting (Chapter 6) and suggests ways to improve the environment. (Appendix C of the Report provides details of a qualitative study of sexual harassment in Science, Engineering and Medicine and can be referred to in this context).

Defining sexual harassment as a form of discrimination, the Report emphasizes and differentiates such behavior into three categories. These include: (i) **gender harassment**

(verbal and non-verbal behaviours that convey hostility, objectification, exclusion or second-class status about members of one gender); (ii) **unwanted sexual attention** (verbal or physical unwelcome sexual advances, which can include assault), and (iii) **sexual coercion** (when favourable professional or educational treatment is conditioned on sexual activity) (*emphasis as in the original text*). These behaviours, according to the Report, can be direct (targeted at an individual) or ambient (general level of sexual harassment in an environment).

The Report provides elaborate details of how these behaviours play out on the ground (among students/faculty in academic establishments). More importantly, it offers a scathing critique of how educational institutions have allowed themselves to be perceived as ‘permissive environments’ where sexually harassing behaviour is not just ‘not contained’ but in fact, very often, normalized. To quote the original: “when targets report, they are either retaliated against or nothing happens to the perpetrator” (p. 51); “The interview responses demonstrate that the behaviour of male colleagues, whom higher-ranking faculty or administrators perceive as ‘superstars’ in their particular substantive area, were often minimized or ignored” (p. 51); “The normalization of sexual harassment and gender bias was also noted as fueling this behaviour in new cohorts of sciences, engineering and medicine faculty” (p. 52).

The Report alludes to the ‘culture’ of higher education workplaces which promotes the notion of an ‘ideal worker’ or in other words, someone who works fulltime and consistently over a lifetime and avails no leaves for maternity, child care or other care-giving responsibilities (p. 54). The message thus sent out is that women who disproportionately bear these responsibilities ‘do not belong here.’ The ‘ideal worker’ norm also indirectly contributes to perpetuating the perception of women not being as capable and competent as men are. Several respondents considered such gender-based harassment far more pernicious to their functioning and well-being than harassment in the form of unwanted sexual advances.

Significant power differentials between mostly male-dominated gender ratios and leadership within hierarchical organizations are fertile environments for sexual harassment. The Report nevertheless points out that “sexual harassment can be bottom-up, coming from those who have less formal power in the organization; researchers often refer to this as contra power harassment” (p. 56–57). Further, the Report notes that, among science, engineering, and medicine disciplines, female students in *academic medicine* experience more gender harassment by faculty/staff than female students in science and engineering. Worse, women students, trainees and faculty in *academic medical centres* experience sexual harassment by patients, and patients’ families in addition to the harassment they experience from colleagues and those in leadership positions (*emphasis by the author of this article*) (p. 63).

Chapter 4 of the Report describes the disturbing outcomes of sexual harassment experiences. The Report states that women’s experiences of sexual harassment result in jeopardizing their professional, psychological and physical health. The outcomes remain significant even when controlling (1) the experiences of other stressors, (2) other features of the job, (3) personality, and (4) other demographic factors (p. 68). To elucidate further, the Report argues that the links between sexual harassment and declines in psychological and professional well-being remain robust even when other stressors such as general job stress, trauma outside of work, etc., are

taken into account. Similarly, the results remain significant when other features of the job such as organizational tenure, workload, etc., are taken into account. Again, personality related factors such as negative affectivity, neuroticism, narcissism do not take away the significance of sexual harassment outcomes. Demographic factors such as age, educational level, race also do not fully explain the declines in psychological and professional declines. In other words, the adverse impacts of sexual harassment remain significant even after controlling the four factors mentioned above. 'Professional Outcomes' is defined as 'organizational withdrawal' by the sexually harassed person, which is further categorized as (i) work withdrawal (distancing oneself from the work without actually quitting – absenteeism, use of sick leave, etc.), and (ii) job withdrawal (intentions to leave their jobs and organization itself, among others) (p. 70). The Report also lists the tangible and intangible losses that women suffer due to sexual harassment. Tangible losses include the loss of job (for being labelled as a complainer and troublemaker) and the associated loss of financial, personal and social benefits. Intangible losses include the loss of self-esteem, self-confidence, and motivation or passion for work (p. 74).

There is a need for further research to capture the differential impacts, if any, of women of colour as well as of sexual-and gender-minority individuals, often overlooked groups, admits the Report. It further alludes to the "generally hostile environment for this population, ranging from coming-out stress to using the wrong pronouns, to accessibility to safe bathrooms, which suggests it is important to study sexual harassment in this population to see how it may intersect with other forms of harassment (such as heterosexist harassment and transgender harassment) and incivility," quoting existing research (p. 78).

"Coping mechanism, formal reporting for targets is the last resort: it becomes an option only when all others have been exhausted" (p. 81). The reasons why reporting sexual harassment was never an easy or first option forms the qualitative part of the study and documents respondents' own words in detail. The lack of an anonymous or protected channel to raise sexual harassment complaints against a colleague or superior had a chilling effect on all forms of disclosure (p. 254). It was a pervasive perception that university-level reporting mechanisms focused heavily on protecting the institution rather than supporting the target of harassment. Further, the respondents remarked that for certain roles and situations, viz., post-doctoral students or when the victim or perpetrator were at different institutions, there were no mechanisms in place for reporting (p. 255). Sexual harassment at academic workplaces violates research integrity (where the latter relies on a set of ethical principles and professional standards), says the Report.

Six approaches to improve the ambience and culture in higher education were identified by the committee (authors) of this Report. There is a need to integrate the values of diversity, inclusion and respect into policies, procedures, organizational strategies and human resource systems, many of which, according to the Report, "already have problematic norms and values built into them" (p. 125). Women of colour and sexual and gender minorities 'cannot bring their' 'whole selves' to their work, argues the Report. This forms the backbone of the need and relevance for diversity initiatives in the larger breadth of sexual harassment. Instead, they must 'code switch' while at work – that is, adopt the behaviour patterns, speech, dress and values of the majority group' (p. 125). Not relenting to switch code could lead to gender

harassment, and the constant need to police oneself to switch code could be less productive vis-à-vis professional competence and advancement. Similarly, wherever evaluation and reward structures are focused solely on individual-level teaching and research performance, with no consideration for how respectful and cooperative one's behaviour has been, could lead to hiring practices that not only take on 'star performers' (those who bring in considerable resources) but also protect such 'stars' despite it being known that these stars are known, sexual offenders. Comprehending how our society is deeply biased, and how to respond when such biases turn into harassment is another aspect dealt with in the Report. 'Bystander intervention training' teaches people how to respond when they witness problematic behaviour (p. 133) and this is an integral part of the Report. Institutions keen on establishing zero tolerance to sexual harassment need to follow-up investigations within a reasonable timeframe. The Report also emphasizes, "The disciplinary action should not be something that is often considered a benefit for faculty, such as reduction in teaching load or time away from campus service responsibilities. In other words, perpetrators should not be 'rewarded' for their behaviour" (p. 144). Further research is required to evaluate the various approaches and trainings to arrive at best practices, notes the Report.

Undoubtedly, this Report makes a seminal contribution to our understanding of how sexual harassment is not just a gross violation of human rights but one that is fraught with deep adverse consequences for those who are targets of such harassment. The Report becomes all the more important when posited against attempts to involve more women and members of minority communities into higher education institutions of science, engineering and medicine. Even when in a different geographical context, countries across the globe can learn much from this Report.

A couple of observations that a close reading of the Report raises: One, over a long period, and including in the United States, courses in Women's/Gender Studies, and the institutionalization of Women's/Gender Studies as a discipline has enabled non-STEM educational institutions to initiate and carry on continuous conversations and actions around the broad theme of gender-based violence. While the Report alludes to non-STEM initiatives in passing, it does not elaborate on why the authors of the Report have not drawn from the experiences of non-STEM institutions. It is also not clear from the Report whether such efforts to engage with non-STEM institutions were made, and if so, with what effect. The review of literature done by the Report under consideration also does not mention whether it actively searched for studies that have dealt with sexual harassment issues in higher education institutions in general and that cover disciplines other than STEM. Two, throughout the Report, an observation that stands out is that academic medical institutions are far more prone to sexual harassment than academic science and engineering institutions, with targets in medical institutions even feeling unsafe in their places of work. It is not very clear from the Report whether, after realizing this fact of academic medical establishments being more prone to sexual harassment, efforts were made to find out what is it about medical establishments that makes them particularly pernicious places of work. Three, a profitable way to carry forward the mission begun by the Report, namely, 'Changing the Culture and Climate in Higher Education' could be to first explore what is it about the syllabus and contents of the

existing STEM courses that contribute in no small measure to the production of the pernicious environment sketched by the Report.