A Review of Organizational Strategies for Reducing Sexual Harassment: Insights from the U. S. Military

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Sexual harassment is a form of sexual victimization with its roots in sexism. Despite efforts to reduce its prevalence, it continues to be one of the most common forms of workplace mistreatment. This article examined best practices in system-level interventions to reduce sexual harassment in the workplace and presents data from the U.S. Armed Forces to demonstrate the roles of organizational leadership, and sexual harassment policies and training, on reducing sexual harassment and improving outcomes when it does occur. We assert that a clear and consistent antiharassment message from organizational leaders is essential. This is communicated via a written, widely disseminated policy on sexual harassment; regular educational training for all members of the organization; formal and informal reporting, investigation, and remediation procedures. Finally, we suggest that organizations conduct regular self-assessments of sexual harassment and perceptions of the organizational climate as proactive efforts to effectively intervene and eliminate its occurrence.

Sexual harassment continues to be one of the most common forms of workplace mistreatment with nearly half of all working women experiencing harassment over the course of their work lives (Ilies, Hauserman, Schwochau, & Stibal, 2003). Research on stopping sexual harassment has largely focused on either the individual responsibility of targeted victims to confront and report their harassers, or on characteristics of men who harass. A smaller body of research has focused on the ways in which organizations can reduce the incidence of sexual harassment via training and policy implementation (e.g., Goldberg, 2007; Perry, Kulik, & Schmidtke, 1998; Reese & Lindenberg, 2004). We review the literature on

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preventing sexual harassment, focusing on system-level interventions designed to reduce the prevalence of sexual harassment in organizations. Over the last 20 years, the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) has periodically surveyed experiences, training, and policies associated with sexual harassment (Firestone & Harris, 2003), making it one of the only large organizations with assessment data relating these factors with outcomes. As such, we use data from the U. S. Armed Forces to illustrate how policies, procedures, and training relate to women's personal experiences and the broader perceptions of sexual harassment in the military.

Definitions, Prevalence, and Outcomes Associated with Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment is a form of victimization rooted in sexism and is considered a form of sex discrimination, in violation of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and 1991. Legally, sexual harassment is divided into two categories, *hostile environment* and *quid pro quo*. A *hostile environment* is created when unwanted gender-based comments and behaviors (gender harassment) or unwanted sexual attention (repeated requests for dates and unwanted sexual touch) create a workplace environment that an employee perceives as hostile or interferes with his/her job performance. *Quid pro quo* refers to any attempt to coerce sexual compliance via job-related threats or promises of benefits (e.g., promising a promotion or threatening termination).

Approximately one half of working women experience sexual harassment prior to retirement (Ilies et al., 2003) and rates are higher for women in hierarchical, male-dominated environments such as the U.S. Armed Forces (where 65–79% of women experience sexual harassment annually; Bastian, Lancaster, & Reist, 1996; Department of Defense Inspector General, 2005). Although sexual harassment is not limited to male-to-female harassment, extensive research has shown that this is the most common type (O'Leary-Kelly, Bowes-Sperry, Bates, & Lean, 2009). Further, sexual harassment is harmful to the well-being of targets, who report increased depression, posttraumatic stress, work withdrawal, intentions to quit, and decreased productivity (Buchanan & Fitzgerald, 2008; Langhout et al., 2005; Willness, Steel, & Lee, 2007).

Organizational-Level Predictors of Sexual Harassment

Several organizational-level factors predict the likelihood that sexual harassment will occur. *Organizational climate* refers to how individuals perceive their workplace, including its policies, practices, and procedures (Parker et al., 2003). In a meta-analysis, Willness et al. (2007) concluded that organizational climate had the strongest relationship with sexual harassment of all the antecedents they tested. A positive organizational climate decreases sexual harassment rates, reduces retaliation against those who do confront and report harassment, and improves the

work and psychological outcomes of victims (see Bergman, Langhout, Palmieri, Cortina, & Fitzgerald, 2002; Glomb, Munson, Hulin, Bergman, & Drasgow, 1999). Thus, the organizational climate can promote or prevent sexual harassment.

Two additional aspects of the organization are also related to the frequency of sexual harassment (Fitzgerald, Drasgow, Hulin, Gelfand, & Magley, 1997). *Job gender context*, the proportion of men and women in a workplace, has been associated with increased harassment when the number of men significantly outnumbers the number of women (as in the military and police; Fitzgerald, Magley, Drasgow, & Waldo, 1999). One reason may be that the numerical gender bias fosters a social bias favoring masculinity and encouraging the mistreatment of women, which in turn increases the likelihood that negative gender-based behaviors directed against women will occur. The final organizational factor related to sexual harassment frequency is *organizational tolerance of sexual harassment* (OTSH). Individuals perceive higher OTSH when targets are punished for complaining, perpetrators are not appropriately punished for harassment, and complaints are not taken seriously (Hulin, Fitzgerald, & Drasgow, 1996). OTSH is reinforced when leadership models harassing behaviors or indicates disregard for policies against and training regarding harassment (Fitzgerald et al., 1997).

Organizational Policies and Procedures Regarding Sexual Harassment

Efforts to reduce and eliminate sexual harassment not only benefit potential targets, but they also benefit and protect the organization. Sexual harassment affects the organization because targeted employees report decreased performance and organizational commitment, as well as increased withdrawal, turnover, and team conflict (Faley, Knapp, Kustis, & Dubois, 1999; O'Leary-Kelly et al., 2009; Settles, Cortina, Malley, & Stewart, 2006). Regarding protections to the organization, in *Faragher v. Boca Raton* (1998), the Supreme Court held that an employer may make an affirmative defense to liability if: (1) they have an antiharassment policy and clear procedures for reporting harassment; (2) they have documented their prompt corrective action to stop the harassment and prevent its recurrence when they were aware of such behavior; and (3) the target of the harassment failed to take advantage of the preventative and corrective procedures outlined by the employer. When employers can demonstrate due diligence in each of these domains, they are protected from liability for damages resulting from sexual harassment. Protection from liability, combined with improving the well-being of employees, can be important incentives for employers.

The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) established guidelines for what effective sexual harassment policies should contain (Casellas & Hill, 2006). First, a strong policy should define sexual harassment and clearly state that it will not be tolerated within the organization. Paludi and Paludi (2003) also recommend that senior organizational leaders disseminate the policy annually to

all members of the organization. Second, policies should be in writing, rather than relying solely on verbal communication of harassment expectations (Casellas & Hill, 2006). Further, the policy should not only be reproduced in all associated handbooks, but also placed prominently throughout the company to ensure that individuals have ample exposure to the content (Paludi & Paludi, 2003). Perhaps more importantly, these procedures communicate the organization's commitment to maintaining a harassment-free environment, which is a strong correlate of its reduced incidence (Williams, Fitzgerald, & Drasgow, 1999). Additionally, organizational leaders' modeling of respectful workplace behavior positively influences the behavior of subordinates (Cortina & Berdahl, 2008).

The EEOC (2012) makes three additional recommendations, stating that organizations should: (1) establish procedures for making a complaint; (2) promptly and thoroughly investigate complaints; and (3) initiate prompt corrective action when a complaint is substantiated. Employees should have several options for reporting harassment, including anonymous methods, such as the U. S. military's sexual harassment hotline, and choices to whom a report can be made (Paludi & Paludi, 2003). They should also have options about who can lead the investigation, including the investigator's gender and race, and whether the investigator is from within the organization or is an outside consultant (Paludi & Paludi, 2003; Reese & Lindenberg, 2004).

It is also beneficial for targets to have the option to pursue either formal or informal investigation, and for the complainant to be able to provide feedback regarding what consequences will be imposed on the harasser (Paludi & Paludi, 2003). Benefits of formal processes include that sanctions can be imposed, serial perpetrators can be tracked, and there is clear organizational accountability for continued transgressions. Nevertheless, participation in an investigation is sometimes considered to be as stressful as the original harassment (Paludi & Paludi, 2003). Further, formal investigative processes are often highly contentious, harassment often persists and worsens, and complainants often face retaliation from the perpetrator or coworkers because their identities cannot be kept confidential (Cortina & Magley, 2003). Reporting may also be harmful to the victim's overall psychological well-being, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment (Bergman et al., 2002). As such, it is recommended that investigators follow-up with the complainant and perpetrator for a minimum of 1 year to determine if the harassment has recurred, if there has been any retaliation, and if the concerns are adequately resolved (Paludi & Paludi, 2003).

These limitations of formal reporting make informal procedures, such as conflict resolution, mediation, and arbitration, preferable for some (Foote & Goodman-Delahunty, 2005). Studies find that targets rarely report harassment formally (Magley, 2002), often preferring that the negative behavior end without formal complaints, investigations, and punishments. Informal procedures allow those who have been harassed greater flexibility in determining how they want

the complaint handled and the types and degree of intervention (Paludi & Paludi, 2003). For example, informal processes can provide private, potentially collaborative attempts to end the offensive behavior without significant conflict and formal sanctions. However, Cortina and Berdahl (2008) caution that, because they are private and often do not focus on punishing the offender, such procedures may not act as deterrents for the offender or other potential harassers.

Although limited, evidence suggests that those who witness the sexual harassment of others can be powerful forces in confronting and reducing harassment (Bowes-Sperry & O'Leary-Kelly, 2005). However, bystanders rarely confront discrimination of any kind (Bowes-Sperry & O'Leary-Kelly, 2005; Good, Moss-Racusin, & Sanchez, 2012). Research suggests that perpetrator power, perceived responsibility, perceived costs, and the ability to decide on an appropriate response all influence whether witnesses confront (Ashburn-Nardo, Blanchar, Petersson, Morris, & Goodwin, 2014). When considering whether or not to file a formal complaint, targets often seek guidance from trusted others, such as coworkers, which influences whether they file a complaint or charge (Lind, Greenberg, Scott, & Welchans, 2000). Thus, training and education initiatives, the final recommendation of the EEOC (Casellas & Hill, 2006; EEOC, 2012), are of maximum benefit when all members of an organization participate, ensuring everyone knows the policies and procedures, and feels empowered to stop harassment.

Training and Education

Although essential, policies alone are not sufficient to stop harassment; training is necessary to connect policies to positive workplace outcomes (Reese & Lindenberg, 2004). Organizations that provide education on harassment increase employee knowledge of the definitions and policies related to sexual harassment (Antecol & Cobb-Clark, 2003), increase the likelihood that a target will file a complaint if harassed, improve bystanders' responses, reduce victim-blaming (Lonsway, Cortina, & Magley, 2008), reduce the likelihood that the targets will experience negative consequences when they do report, and increase endorsements that workplace sexual behavior is inappropriate (Bingham & Scherer, 2001). Although 90% of businesses conduct some form of sexual harassment training (Dolezalek, 2005), it is often brief with little consistency across programs (Magley, Grossman, & Kath, 2004).

There are several models for training and education regarding sexual harassment. The most common training method involves employees viewing instructional videos (Perry et al., 1998). This paradigm is often preferred because it allows trainers to illustrate behaviors that constitute sexual harassment. In fact, video-based training increased participant overall knowledge of what behaviors constitute sexual harassment and lowered the likelihood that men with a high propensity to harass would engage in sexually harassing behaviors (Perry et al.,

1998). However, video-based learning did not influence the long-term harassment attitudes of training participants. Another common pedagogical tool used in harassment education is computerized internet-based training (Wellbrock, 1999). Computerized and internet-based training programs allow employees to work at their own pace and schedule, may permit employers to easily individualize employee training by requiring specific modules based on his/her educational needs, and facilitate training for all employees across multiple locations.

Group educational sessions with a live trainer are another popular mechanism used in sexual harassment training. Compared to video- and computer-based trainings, live training sessions that involve group discussion are often more expensive (Wellbrock, 1999). However, training methods that involved face-to-face communication were more effective at changing attitudes than more passive forms of learning, such as video- and computer-based methods (Perry et al., 1998). Moreover, training many employees within a workgroup resulted in improved recognition of harassing behaviors and attitudes toward harassment, over and above the individual effects of training (Antecol & Cobb-Clark, 2003).

Experiential methods (e.g., role play simulations and behavioral modeling) can be powerful methods to increase knowledge, particularly when they increase empathy and reduce resistance (Perry, Kulik, & Field, 2009; Zawadzki, Shields, Danube, & Swim, 2014). One such program is WAGES, which is designed to reduce subtle sexism through team-based game play and discussion (Shields, Zawadzki, & Johnson, 2011). In WAGES, participants observe how small advantages given to the White Team members (representing men) lead to faster career advancement compared to Green Team members (representing women). Studies have found that WAGES reduces sexist attitudes, especially for women, via reduced reactance, increased self-efficacy, and increased knowledge about sexism (Zawadzki et al., 2014) and that it increases both recognition that sexism is harmful and the intention to learn about and discuss gender inequity (Cundiff, Zawadzki, Danube, & Shields, 2014). Finally, research has found that the frequency of sexual harassment complaints is further reduced when companies continue to have post-training activities to solidify the knowledge and maintenance interventions that are matched to the organization and individual trainee differences (Perry et al., 2009).

The U.S. Military: A Case Study

To demonstrate the role of organizational interventions to reduce sexual harassment, we use the U.S. Armed Forces as an illustration. The U.S. Armed Forces are male-dominated and hierarchical, with a highly masculine climate that emphasizes strength, endurance, and adherence to rules (Burke, 2004). Sexual harassment is more likely to occur in these types of environments (Bastian et al., 1996; Fitzgerald et al., 1999), and military personnel report higher rates of

sexual harassment than civilian women (65–79% per year compared to 50% over the course of their working lives; Bastian et al., 1996; Department of Defense Inspector General, 2005). As a result, military leaders instituted policies and procedures in an attempt to reduce its incidence (e.g., Department of Defense, 2008; Firestone & Harris, 2003). The presence of policies and procedures regarding sexual harassment is one reason that the U.S. military is an excellent organization in which to examine the relationship between organizational interventions and women's experiences of sexual harassment. As part of these efforts, the Department of Defense (DoD) has been periodically administering surveys to assess the frequency, reporting, and outcomes of sexual harassment for over 20 years (Firestone & Harris, 2003). As such, it is one of the only organizations that assess outcomes related to training programs, antisexual harassment policies, and reporting procedures. In addition, the high rates of sexual harassment in the military combined with the large number of women provide a large sample with which to study sexual harassment and organizational outcomes. This fact makes it an important organization in which to examine the effectiveness of sexual harassment interventions. Finally, because of the masculine climate, members of the U.S. military may be highly resistant to change regarding attitudes toward women. Thus, the military may be a "conservative" test of the effectiveness of organizational interventions.

We report data from 9,725 military women who completed the 2002 "Status of the Armed Forces Surveys: Workplace and Gender Relations" (Form 2002GB) assessment (see Lipari & Lancaster, 2004 for details on survey procedures). Despite subsequent surveys, the 2002 survey is the most recent version to include all of the relevant variables in the publically accessible data set. In 2002, 59% of women who completed the survey reported experiencing sexual harassment within the past 12 months. Participants ($n = 5,162$) answered questions about their most significant sexual harassment experience in the past year (Ns for specific questions vary and are reported in the text or tables). Then, considering that significant experience, they reported to what extent they confronted their harasser(s) by stating that they "didn't like what he or she was doing," told the person(s) to stop, or asked the person(s) to leave them alone. Over 80% of sexually harassed women in the military engaged in some form of confronting. Nearly half (49%) of women reported confronting their harasser(s) to a large extent, 31% confronted to a small or moderate extent, and 21% did not confront at all. However, formal reporting rates were considerably lower, with only 29% ($n = 1,462$) stating that they filed a formal complaint.

Those participants who filed a formal complaint went on to rate their overall satisfaction with the outcome of the complaint, and report on whether or not authorities took specific actions in response to their complaint. Satisfaction with the outcome of their complaint was significantly related to the actions taken by investigators (see Table 1). Complainants were far more satisfied with the

Table 1. Satisfaction with the Outcome of the Complaint by Actions Taken by Investigators

Action taken	Yes		No					
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*df*	*p*	Cohen's *d*
Person(s) who bothered you was/were talked to about the behavior	3.35	1.27	2.42	1.21	9.66	956	<.001	0.75
Complaint was/is being investigated	3.24	1.40	2.95	1.26	3.27	1035	.001	0.22
Encouraged to drop the complaint	1.93	1.07	3.34	1.15	–18.01	1195	<.001	–1.27
Complaint was discounted or not taken seriously	2.05	1.00	3.59	1.08	–24.18	1173	<.001	–1.48
No action was taken	2.38	1.23	3.58	1.16	–15.61	978	<.001	–1.01

Note. Satisfaction with the outcome of the complaint ranges from 1 (*very dissatisfied*) to 5 (*very satisfied*).

outcome when the offensive behavior was discussed with the perpetrator, when the complaint was investigated, when no one encouraged them to drop the complaint, when their complaint was taken seriously, and when action was taken. Among those who formally reported their sexual harassment, overall satisfaction with the outcome of their complaint was associated with positive perceptions the reporting process, $r = .66, p < .001$, which included being kept informed about the progress of their complaint, having their privacy respected, and being satisfied with the amount of time it took to resolve their complaint. Further, when women's sexual harassment complaints were substantiated ($M = 3.40, SD = 1.27$), they reported being more satisfied with the outcome, $t(770) = 8.46, p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.81$, compared to when women's complaints were unsubstantiated ($M = 2.36, SD = 1.29$). Thus, it seems that when women felt they had voice, were informed as the process moved forward, and were taken seriously, they evaluated the outcome of the reporting process more favorably.

The military also initiated training to reduce the incidence of sexual harassment. In 2002, 76% of women and 77% of men in the full sample reported that they had some sexual harassment training in the past year, averaging 1.7 hours ($SD = 1.5$) of training. Women who reported their sexual harassment to authorities ($M = 3.93, SD = 0.71$) viewed the training less positively than those who did not report their sexual harassment ($M = 4.03, SD = 0.63$), however, the effect size for this difference was small, $t(3821) = –3.65, p < .001$; Cohen's $d = 0.13$. Among women who made a formal complaint, their satisfaction with its outcome was

positively related to perceptions that the sexual harassment training was effective, $r = .25, p < .001$; training was viewed as more effective when it defined what sexual harassment is; provided information about its policies, procedures, and consequences; and allowed individuals to feel safe to complain about harassment. Why women chose *not* to formally report their sexual harassment was also related to the sexual harassment training. Namely, women who felt their sexual harassment training was less effective overall were more likely to say they did not report their harassment because they were afraid of retaliation ($r = -.27, p < .001$), they were talked out of doing so ($r = -.10, p < .001$), they felt too uncomfortable to do so ($r = -.22, p < .001$), or they did not know how to report it ($r = -.15, p < .001$). Thus, positive views of sexual harassment training were associated with women's more positive perceptions of the reporting process and outcome, and being more likely to report sexual harassment.

Concerns regarding retaliation appear to be warranted. Women who filed a formal complaint, compared to women who did not, reported more negative treatment at work as a result. Specifically, women who formally reported their sexual harassment ($M = .28, SD = .36$) indicated that they received more interpersonal retaliation (e.g., being ignored, shunned, blamed, or gossiped about) than those who did not make a report ($M = .08, SD = .20$), $t(4899) = 19.92, p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.69$. Women who made a complaint ($M = .12, SD = .23$) also reported more organizational retaliation (e.g., poor job performance evaluation, denial of promotion, or transfer to less desirable job) than those who did not make a report ($M = .03, SD = .18$), $t(4901) = 13.65, p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.49$. Thus, women who engaged in the formal reporting process experienced various forms of retaliation for doing so.

The attitudes and behaviors of military leaders contributed to women's personal experiences of sexual harassment as well as their feelings about sexual harassment in the military. Participants were asked whether "leadership makes an honest and reasonable effort to stop sexual harassment," and to what extent leadership in the individual's unit/work group and installation/ship "modeled respectful behavior to both male and female personnel" (see Table 2). When women felt that leadership was working to stop sexual harassment and modeled respectful behavior, they reported experiencing less sexual harassment in the past 12 months, were more satisfied with the outcome of their sexual harassment complaint (if one was made), viewed the sexual harassment training as more effective, felt that sexual harassment was less of a problem "today than 4 years ago," and perceived that sexual harassment occurs less often in the military "now as compared to a few years ago." These results underscore the importance of organizational leaders in setting the climate and tone for how individuals within the organization interact with each other, and in reducing the frequency of sexual harassment.

Table 2. Correlations of Perceptions of Leadership and Sexual Harassment Outcomes

	Harassment frequency (*n*)	Outcome satisfaction (*n*)	Training effectiveness (*n*)	Harassment 4 years (*n*)	Harassment now (*n*)
Leadership makes an honest and reasonable effort to stop sexual harassment (0 = no, 1 = yes)	−.29** (9,725)	.40** (1,302)	.30** (7,262)	−.27** (7,096)	−.28** (6,914)
Leadership in unit/work group model respectful behavior to both male and female personnel (0 = not at all to 5 = very large extent)	−.37** (9,526)	.40** (1,281)	.45** (7,205)	−.29** (7,025)	−.31** (6,845)
Leadership on installation/ship model respectful behavior to both male and female personnel (0 = not at all to 5 = very large extent)	−.35** (9,350)	.34** (1,265)	.44** (7,083)	−.27** (6,902)	−.29** (6,723)

Note. Harassment frequency = mean frequency of sexual harassment behaviors in past 12 months; Outcome satisfaction = satisfaction with outcome of complaint; Training effectiveness = perceived effectiveness of sexual harassment training; Harassment 4 years = perception that sexual harassment has become more of a problem over the last 4 years (1 = less of a problem today, 2 = about the same as 4 years ago, 3 = more of a problem today); Harassment now = perception that sexual harassment occurs more in the military now, as compared to a few years ago (1 = much less often to 5 = much more often).
**$p < .001$

Implications and Recommendations for Reducing Sexual Harassment in the Workplace

The results from the U.S. military survey support best practice recommendations for ways in which organizations should address sexual harassment. Having strong antiharassment policies, training, and education for all members of an organization can be powerful forces in reducing sexual harassment. These findings also guide organizations toward best practices for improving outcomes when harassment does occur. Not only do these efforts benefit victims of sexual harassment, but they also benefit the organization, as satisfaction with the organization's handling of sexual harassment reduces the likelihood that the victim will pursue legal redress (Buchanan & Fitzgerald, 2008). When leaders are firm and consistent in conveying that harassment will not be tolerated, individuals report experiencing

less harassment and are more likely to report it should it occur (Firestone & Harris, 2003; Williams et al., 1999), which provides organizations with an opportunity to proactively address harassment in its midst. As such, organizations have additional incentives to actively confront harassment and handle complaints to the victim's satisfaction.

Equity in the workplace is also essential for reducing the incidence of sexual harassment. Cortina and Berdahl (2008) suggested that organizational leaders consider "organizational desegregation," including increasing the number of women in male-dominated workplaces to balance sex ratios, promoting more women to visible positions of leadership, promoting gender egalitarianism, and enhancing equity in the power men and women have within the organization. Greater gender equity may also increase men's likelihood to serve as allies and actively confront sexist behaviors when they occur. Drury and Kaiser (2014) suggest that men's confrontations may be more impactful than women's efforts to confront sexism because men are perceived as more legitimate due to the fact that they do not directly benefit from the reduction of sexism. Equity across other demographic factors, such as race and sexual orientation, impact rates of sexual harassment as well. Intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1993) suggests that combinations of social group memberships (e.g., Black woman, gay man) place individuals in unique social positions that influence their perceptions of the world, their experiences, and life outcomes (Cole, 2009; Crenshaw, 1993; Shields, 2008). Further, some individuals may be especially vulnerable to sexual harassment because they occupy multiple marginalized social positions. For example, there is evidence that Black and White women are differentially targeted for sexual harassment (Berdahl & Moore, 2006; Buchanan, Settles, & Woods, 2008). Sexual orientation and perceived gender nonconformity also influence harassment, putting lesbian and less feminine women at greater risk of sexual harassment (Berdahl, 2007). In the U. S. military, gay men and lesbian women were not allowed to openly serve in the armed forces until the Don't Ask Don't Tell Repeal Act of 2010 (Public Law No: 111–321). Past versions of the military's study of harassment, including the version our results are based on, did not permit questions related to sexual orientation or gender identity. As a result, the extent to which harassment was based on perceptions of sexual orientation or gender presentation remains unknown. Nevertheless, when a woman is sexual harassed on the basis of multiple social identities (e.g., gender and race), the organization may be exposed to additional discrimination charges.

For organizations to appropriately address sexually harassing behaviors, we suggest that they regularly conduct confidential assessments of sexual harassment and workplace climate across all employees. The military's survey of sexual harassment illustrates that such efforts can alert organizations to the extent of the problem and provides them with an opportunity for early intervention. When employers understand their employee's perceptions of the organizational climate and

its tolerance of harassment, they can better predict the likelihood that employees will engage in sexual harassment and the likelihood that harassed employees will report it promptly. Doing so provides the organization with an opportunity to demonstrate a commitment to protecting workers and reinforce that harassment will not be tolerated, which is one of the most effective ways of reducing sexual harassment overall. Regular assessments can also provide concrete data on long-term trends in the nature and incidence of harassment, the effectiveness of training initiatives, and ideally, the eventual elimination of harassment within the workplace.

There are some limitations in the existing literature on organizational strategies for reducing sexual harassment. First, more research is needed on different types of sexual harassment training in order to create best practices for training. From the current literature, in person and experiential learning methods appear to be the most effective. However, it is clear that training sometimes leads to backlash and undesired outcomes (Goldberg, 2007). Zawadzki et al. (2014) suggest that effective reduction in sexist attitudes requires not only an increase in knowledge and the ability to identify sexist behaviors, but also feelings of self-efficacy and a lack of reactance. Research on ways to incorporate these characteristics into existing sexual harassment trainings may be useful.

Second, more longitudinal studies are needed. It is important to examine whether policies, procedures, and training lead to a decrease in the amount of sexual harassment within an organization over extended periods of time. Short-term assessments of change following an intervention are insufficient because organizational change often occurs slowly, spreads through an organization as the culture changes, and gains momentum over time. Longitudinal research would permit an examination of the dynamic changes that take place within an organization once these interventions are in place. For example, if one or two sexually harassed women follow the organization's policies and procedures and have a positive resolution to their complaint, it may result in both decreased future sexual harassment (as potential perpetrators are dissuaded by the threat of sanctions) and increased reporting and confrontation of sexual harassment by others.

Most sexual harassment research and organizational interventions are focused on management of sexual harassment once it occurs. Further, much of these efforts assume that giving people more knowledge about what sexual harassment is and how it harms targets will reduce individuals' propensity to harass. Yet evidence suggests that this is not the case. For example, despite widespread sexual harassment training in the U.S. military, sexual harassment remains a critical problem. We suggest that researchers increase their focus on factors that motivate individuals to sexually harass others (e.g., to exert power; to enforce gender conformity; Berdahl, 2007). This change in focus may lead to novel organizational interventions directed at the core motivational factors of potential perpetrators.

Summary

In addition to the high costs paid by targets, sexual harassment costs organizations millions of dollars every year, over and above legal costs, due to absenteeism, reduced productivity, and job turnover (Faley et al., 1999). As such, it behooves organizational leaders to develop effective and comprehensive programs to eliminate sexual harassment. There are several best practices in system-level interventions to reduce sexual harassment in the workplace. For example, it is essential that organizational leaders provide a clear and consistent antiharassment message. This should be communicated via a written, widely disseminated policy on sexual harassment, regular educational training for all organizational members, and the implementation of formal and informal reporting, investigation, and remediation procedures. Finally, we assert that organizations should conduct regular self-assessments of sexual harassment prevalence and perceptions of the organizational climate in their efforts to eliminate its occurrence.

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It's no secret that most sexual harassment goes unreported. Yet employers continue to insist that formal reporting is the best (and only) option for victims. Those who are uncomfortable reporting are left with no alternative. Isn't it time we offered some other strategies these victims can use? I hold a Ph.D. in Psychology from UCLA and two graduate degrees (management and operations research) from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), and an undergrad degree in mathematics and computer science from Vassar College. Read Less. Print. Sexual harassment is a form of discrimination that consists of three types of harassing behavior: (1) gender harassment (verbal and nonverbal behaviors that convey hostility, objectification, exclusion, or second-class status about members of one gender); (2) unwanted sexual attention (unwelcome verbal or physical sexual advances, which can include assault); and (3) sexual coercion (when favorable professional or educational. treatment is conditioned on sexual activity). To measure the incidence of sexual harassment, surveys should follow the best practices that have emerged from the science of sexual harassment. But we can't address sexual harassment effectively if a vast number of victims still feel unsafe reporting it, or if their stories are mangled by other humans. Popular on Behavioral Scientist. Behavioral Scientist's Summer Book List 2021. A review of organizational strategies for reducing sexual harassment: Insights from the US military. Journal of Social Issues, 70(4), 687-702. (Link).