# The problem of sexual harassment

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#### Letters from Academia

In the last few months, the media have been inundated with news about sexual harassment of women. The cases with the most notoriety have been those of celebrities or associated with the entertaining industry, but they have not been the only ones. This attention to the issue has generated what is called the "Me Too Movement" (or "MeToo"). With sexual harassment and assault occurring in every segment of society, it is important to ask how this issue is seen on college campuses, which have been accused of too much "political correctness" in the past.

A new study published last week by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine paints a bleak picture of this problem on college and university campuses. Titled "Sexual Harassment of Women: Climate, Culture, and Consequences in Academic Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine," the study shows how widespread the problem is, pointing out the causes but also providing a number of recommendations on how to deal with this issue.

To begin with, it is important to define what we mean by sexual harassment because it has many forms and shapes. The report says that there are three categories of sexually harassing behavior: "(1) gender harassment (verbal and non-verbal behaviors that convey hostility, objectification, exclusion, or second-class status about members of one gender), (2) unwanted sexual attention (verbal or physical unwelcome sexual advances, which can include assault), and (3) sexual coercion (when favorable professional or educational treatment is conditioned on sexual activity). Harassing behavior can be either direct (targeted at an individual) or ambient (a general level of sexual harassment in an environment)."

The study identified five major reasons why this is still a problem. The first one is perceived tolerance for sexual harassment, meaning when victims or others in the workplace feel that nothing can be done regarding sexual harassment because it is and has been tolerated for a long time, that it is part of culture, and can't be changed.

A second reason is workplaces that are dominated by males. They oftentimes have had little sensitivity in dealing with conduct and behavior that is unacceptable to women. This is particularly the case in some disciplines in higher education where most of the practitioners have historically been males, such as engineering, physics, mathematics and philosophy.

A third factor is the nature of the power structure. Despite the fact that more and more women get into the academy, positions at the top (from the college president to the department chair and everyone in between) tend to be males because they have the most seniority.

The fourth factor is called "symbolic compliance," in other words, when the institution says it is doing what the law tells it to do. This, of course, is not the same as taking effective and visible action to show that sexual harassment is not to be tolerated under any circumstances.

The last factor mentioned is uninformed leadership, that is, people at the top of the institution or with management responsibilities, such as department chairs, who have not been trained on how to identify and deal with these kinds of issues.

So how to deal with this pervasive problem? The report issued a number of recommendations, the most relevant being:

1. Create diverse, inclusive and respectful environments. That is, to achieve more gender equality in the workplace so women do not feel as a minority, defenseless group. Also, we need to pay women the same as men; currently women faculty are being paid on average 10 percent less than their male counterparts.

2. Address the most common form of sexual harassment: gender harassment. The use of language or the demonstration of attitudes that are offensive toward women, such as verbal expressions ("chicks") or misogynist jokes must not be tolerated. It is important to understand that its not just actual physical abuse that creates a hostile environment.

3. Improve transparency and accountability. That means to denounce sexual harassment incidents, act on them, and then show that appropriate action has been taken. Although the victims have a right to maintain their privacy, we all know that the rumor mill is there and coworkers will know whether appropriate action was taken.

4. Provide support for the target of the harassment. As soon as the victim has been identified, the person should be provided with all the appropriate support in terms of professional counseling, personal consideration, and a clear action plan that demonstrates that the leadership is taking the issue seriously.

5. Strive for strong and diverse leadership. The leadership of institutions of higher education at all ranks should be more diversified both in gender and ethnicity. The reason is very simple. A victim will feel less secure in bringing up a complaint if the person in charge happens to be a male.

6. Incentivize change. Whoever is contributing to create a more sensitive work environment regarding this issue should be publicly recognized. In other words, reward leadership in this area so others feel encouraged to follow suit.

7. Make the entire academic community responsible for reducing and preventing sexual harassment. What this means is that while individual actions matter, we should institutionalize the idea that sexual harassment in all its forms is wrong and that decisive action needs to be taken to erase it from the culture of the institution.

Although the report makes many other suggestions, the ones above clearly indicate that there are many actions that can and should be taken in order to right these wrongs.

Those of us in higher education should be a beacon of morality and respect for others. To be otherwise would give bad examples to the generations to come.

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