

## The Effect of Harasser Performance Status and Complainant Tolerance on Reactions to a Complaint of Sexual Harassment

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An experiment was conducted to assess the effect of victim tolerance, harasser performance status, and decision maker sex on reactions to a complaint of sexual harassment. Judges' reactions were less favorable toward the complainant when she had endured the harassment and when her harasser was an above-average performer. Also, relative to males, female decision makers' reactions were more favorable toward the complainant and less favorable toward the perpetrator. The implications of the findings for training and organizational efforts to counter sexual harassment in the workplace are discussed. © 1996 Academic Press, Inc.

The presence of sexual harassment exists as an important challenge for the management of a gender-diverse workforce. To effectively address the problem organizations need to establish sexual harassment policies that clearly define what constitutes inappropriate behaviors and describe the process for dealing with complaints of harassment (Gutek, 1989; Mackillop, 1993). It is essential that procedures ensure that complaints are assessed in a fair and objective manner, and that responses to the harasser who is found guilty will deter further harassment. These criteria will help to let victims feel that their complaints will be taken seriously and will encourage them to come forward. This is important because the way in which complaints of sexual harassment are handled signifies an organization's lack of tolerance for sexual harassment (Fitzgerald & Shullman, 1993). This is particularly relevant to women because women, more than men, are more likely to experience sexual harassment. For example, surveys have found that 40-50% of women have experienced some form of

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sexual harassment, whereas the incidence among men ranges from 15–20% (Gutek, 1985; U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 1981, 1988). Because of this, the present investigation focused on sexual harassment as it concerns women as the targets of harassment and men as perpetrators.

Although an effective process for handling complaints of sexual harassment is central to efforts to counter the problem, feedback from women suggests that procedures in many organizations are unsatisfactory. For instance, a survey involving 9000 women reported that “the vast majority of women who are harassed did not feel that they could safely report a problem” (Sandroff, 1992, p. 48). Moreover, women who have complained of harassment report that they have been made to feel like troublemakers (Clarke, 1988), fear retaliation (Silverman, 1977), or fear that they will be blamed for the problem (Thaker, 1992). These concerns may be well founded, as the consequences of making a complaint are often unfavorable. Specifically, women report that the situation became worse after complaining (Livingston, 1982), the complaint was ignored (Sandroff, 1992), the complainant was forced to quit (Coles, 1986; Terpstra & Cook, 1985), or the perpetrator only received a token reprimand (Riger, 1991; Sandroff, 1992). These findings serve to underscore the need for research into this aspect of organizational efforts to deal with sexual harassment.

One facet of the research on sexual harassment has sought to examine the process of judging and responding to complaints of sexual harassment and how these may be compromised by situational factors, the personal characteristics of the people involved in the complaint, as well as the characteristics of those responsible for hearing a complaint (cf. Summers, 1991; Summers & Myklebust, 1992; Thomann & Wiener, 1987). Toward extending this line of research, this study considered three factors as potential influences on judgments and responses to a complaint of sexual harassment. The three factors were the extent to which the victim tolerated and endured the harassment before complaining (victim tolerance), the perpetrator’s performance status, and the sex of the decision maker. These three factors were selected for study because they represent situational considerations that may well be associated with a complaint of sexual harassment and because there are justifications for expecting that their presence might compromise decision making.

Forbearance is a common response for the targets of sexual harassment. For instance, reports from women who have been harassed reveal that many did nothing in response to the harassment (Clarke, 1988; Livingston, 1982; Sandroff, 1992). Similarly, Baker, Terpstra, and Lantz (1990) found that people said they would try to ignore, or do nothing, in response to a range of harassment incidents. However, the question that arises is, what influence does toleration have on decision makers’ responses to a subsequent complaint of sexual harassment? When a person has endured harassment, and then eventually complains, decision makers may feel that the

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