



## Youth at work: Adolescent employment and sexual harassment<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** An examination of the frequency and impact of workplace sexual harassment on work, health, and school outcomes on high school girls is presented in two parts. The first compares the frequency of harassment in this sample (52%) to published research on adult women that used the same measure of sexual harassment. The second part compares outcomes for girls who experienced harassment versus those who did not.

**Methods:** Students in a small, suburban high school for girls completed a paper and pencil survey during class. A modified version of the Sexual Experiences Questionnaire (SEQ; Fitzgerald et al., 1988) was used to identify sexually harassed working teenagers. Work attitudes, assessments of physical health and mental health, and school-related outcomes were measured using standardized scales. Data were analyzed using difference of proportions tests, *t*-tests, and regression.

**Results:** The percentage of harassed girls was significantly higher than the figures reported in most studies of working women. Girls who were sexually harassed were less satisfied with their jobs and supervisors, had higher levels of academic withdrawal, and were more apt to miss school than their non-harassed peers.

**Conclusions:** Sexual harassment significantly impacts employed high school girls' connections to work and school. It not only taints their attitudes toward work but it also threatens to undermine their commitment to school. Educators, practitioners and community leaders should be aware of the negative impact this work experience may have on adolescents and explore these issues carefully with students who are employed outside of school.

**Practice implications:** Teenage students, stressed by sexual harassment experienced at work may find their career development or career potential impeded or threatened due to school absence and poor academic performance. In addition, the physical safety of working students may be at risk, creating a need for teenagers to receive training to deal with sexual assault and other types of workplace violence. Educators, practitioners, and community leaders should be aware of the negative impact this work experience may have on adolescents and their overall school experience and explore the issue of sexual harassment carefully with students who are employed outside of school.

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In 2005, the United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) filed fifteen employment discrimination lawsuits involving teenage workers and sexual harassment. Two of these suits were against different franchises of the national fast-food chain, McDonald's, and reflect the growing number of sexual harassment litigation suits filed by adolescent workers (WJLA, 2005). Prior to 2002, litigation filed against employers by adolescents was uncommon. By 2002, sexual

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harassment complaints filed by teenagers comprised approximately 2% (268) of more than 14,000 suits filed nationwide, and by 2004, teenage workers' charges quadrupled to 8%, and these rates have continued to rise (Drobac, 2007).

Perpetrator behaviors in all of the lawsuits covered a wide gamut from verbal harassment to sexual assault. The EEOC website (<http://youth.eeoc.gov/cases.htm/>) gives brief descriptions of recent sexual harassment suits and also provides information for teenage workers. Two recent lawsuits filed by teenage girls against Burger King (EEOC lawsuit [No. 4:03CV107 HEA] 2005) and McDonald's (EEOC v GLC Inc., 2005) described the girls' experiences of repeated groping, vulgar sexual comments, and demands for sex by male supervisors. In another lawsuit (EEOC v Pand Enterprises Inc., 2005), young men were subjected to same-sex sexual harassment by a male supervisor that included requests for sex, crude sexual remarks, and unwanted touching. The above complaints are similar to those filed by adults in earlier lawsuits, which included claims of sexual assault and intimidation (Harris v Forklift Systems Inc., 1993; Meritor Savings Bank v Vinson, 1986; Oncale v Sundowner Offshore Services, 1998; Runyan v Jacksonville Shipyards, 2005). These adult and juvenile lawsuits highlight the potential serious threat to teenagers' safety in the workplace where a majority of students spend between 5 and 20 hours a week (National Academies, 1998). While previous research has described the types of jobs that adolescents hold, the number of hours they work, and their wages (Bachman & Schulenberg, 1993; Mortimer, 2005), the pervasiveness and impact of sexual harassment has received only minimal attention (Fineran, 2002). It is quite apparent that research has not kept pace with rising legal and social concerns over this issue.

### Adolescent employment

Currently 80–90% of adolescents work at some point during high school and most of them are employed in retail sales, restaurants, grocery stores and health care (Mortimer, 2005). Like adults, working adolescents are protected from discrimination by Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Title VII provides the main framework prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sex, including sexual harassment. EEOC guidelines define sexual harassment as “unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature that constitutes harassment when (1) submission to the conduct is either explicitly or implicitly a term or condition of employment, (2) submission to or rejection of such conduct is used as the basis for employment decisions, or (3) the conduct has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual's work performance or creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive working environment” (EEOC, 1980).

### Sexual harassment and employed adolescents

While numerous studies of adult sexual harassment have been conducted over the past 20 years, few have explored the problem among adolescents who work part-time while attending school. Only three studies documenting adolescent workplace sexual harassment have been conducted during this same time span (Fineran, 2002; Stein, 1981; Strauss & Espeland, 1992). Strauss and Espeland (1992) found that 30% of 250 female vocational students surveyed from four Minnesota school districts had been sexually harassed at work, while a recent study conducted by Fineran (2002) found that 35% of the 332 students who worked part-time reported experiencing sexual harassment (63% girls, 37% boys). None of these studies examined the impact of harassment on health problems or academic performance.

### Sexual harassment and employed women

Three generalizations can be drawn from the research literature on sexual harassment over the last 25 years. First, the percentages of women who reported being sexually harassed varies considerably among the studies. Some reviews of the literature (Fitzgerald & Shullman, 1993; Gruber, 1990; United States Merit Systems Protection Board [USMSPB], 1981, 1995) estimate that 50% of working women have experienced sexual harassment on the job. Recent studies, however, have found estimates that are considerably lower (Cortina & Wasti, 2005; Richman et al., 1999). Part of the reason for these variations is that researchers have often used quite different measures of sexual harassment. Compounding this problem is the use of different time frames—that is, the retrospective time period respondents are asked to use to determine if an offensive behavior (e.g., pressure for a sexual relationship) had occurred. The problem of measurement has been addressed to some extent by the emergence of the Sexual Experiences Questionnaire (SEQ) as the instrument of choice among a growing number of researchers (Shupe, Cortina, Ramos, Fitzgerald, & Salisbury, 2002). A second generalization is that sexual or sexist comments occur more frequently but have less psychological or work-related impact than intrusive forms (e.g., sexual touching, bribery, or assaults) that have significant detrimental health and work-related outcomes. For example, the USMSPB (1995) survey of women federal employees found that sexual remarks (39%) and sexual looks and gestures (29%) were the most common and least severe forms of harassment while pressures for sexual favors (7%) and sexual assault (4%) occurred less frequently but were ranked high in severity.

The final generalization is the consistency of correlates or predictors of victimization across research studies. Some categories of women have high rates of victimization regardless of occupation, geographic region, or nationality (Gruber, Smith, & Kauppinen, 1995). In this regard, demographic and workplace characteristics are important predictors of both frequency and severity of harassment. With particular relevance to our study, research on adults over the last 25 years has provided compelling evidence that young and unmarried women and those with low status or low seniority at

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