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*J Interpers Violence* 1995 10: 309
DOI: 10.1177/088626095010003005

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What is This?
Ethnic differences in the prevalence, type, and outcome of sexual harassment in various work and social settings were examined in a stratified community sample of 248 African American and White American women. Almost half of the women reported sexual harassment in work and social environments. Significant ethnic differences were found in the prevalence and type of sexual harassment and in victim characteristics in work settings. Single African American victims of harassment in social settings were significantly more likely to have incomes at or below the poverty level, compared to their White peers. The finding that significantly more White than African American women reported sexual harassment in a workplace contradicts previous research and suggests the need for further study with multiethnic populations. Future research needs to include a variety of private and public social settings. Factors that prevent women from taking action to remedy sexual harassment across settings should also be examined.

The Prevalence and Context of Sexual Harassment Among African American and White American Women

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Sexual harassment has increasingly been recognized as a widespread problem in the workplace (Crull, 1982; Fitzgerald et al., 1988). Prevalence rates reported by women in various professional, white- and blue-collar work settings tend to fluctuate between 30% and 55% (e.g., Fitzgerald et al., 1988; Griffin-Shelley, 1985; Gruber & Bjorn, 1982; Henley et al., 1985; Maypole, 1986; Maypole & Skaine, 1982; Merit Systems Protection Board, 1981, 1988). In contrast, research on sexual harassment in social settings outside of the workplace is in its beginning stages. The few available findings suggest, however, that the phenomenon is also pervasive in public and private social places, such as on the street or in a person’s home (DiVasto et al., 1984; Packer, 1986; Sheffield, 1989; Sigler & Johnson, 1986).

Although most researchers agree that sexual harassment involves unwanted verbal or physical sexual advances (e.g., Gruber & Bjorn, 1982;...
Renick, 1980), a wide range of definitions exist (Fitzgerald et al., 1988; Hotelling, 1991). For example, some studies include rape on their continuum of sexual harassment behaviors (e.g., Maypole & Skaine, 1982; Merit Systems Protection Board, 1981, 1988), whereas others apparently exclude it (e.g., Griffin-Shelley, 1985; Gruber & Bjorn, 1982).

Incidence rates for the most commonly reported form of sexual harassment on the job, unwanted verbal advances, mostly by superiors and coworkers, range from approximately 34% to 94% (Fitzgerald et al., 1988; Gosselin, 1984; LaFontaine & Tredeau, 1986; Littler-Bishop, Seidler-Feller, & Opaluch, 1982; Maypole, 1986; Maypole & Skaine, 1982; Merit Systems Protection Board, 1988). Harassment involving unwanted touch is reported by 15% to 51% of women at work (Fitzgerald et al., 1988; Merit Systems Protection Board, 1981).

Responses to harassment and its effects on women vary. Avoidance of the harasser appears to be the most common response (25% to 81% of cases, with a median of 41%), followed by attempts to defuse the unwanted advances (0% to 34%, median 24%), to negotiate with the harasser (7% to 41%, median 23%), and to confront the latter (0% to 26%, median 10%) (see Gruber, 1989, for a review of the literature). Reported initial and long-lasting negative effects include physical, psychological, and interpersonal difficulties (Crull, 1982; Gosselin, 1984; Hamilton, Alagna, King, & Lloyd, 1987; Hotelling, 1991; Jensen & Gutek, 1982; Kissman, 1990; Renick, 1980; Salisbury, Ginorio, Remick, & Stringer, 1986).

Some groups of women may be at greater risk of being sexually harassed at work than others. Being single or divorced, being between 20 and 44 years old, being dependent on one’s job, working in a job traditionally occupied by males, and having an immediate male supervisor have been identified as risk factors for sexual harassment with relative consistency (Gruber & Bjorn, 1982; Gutek & Morasch, 1982; LaFontaine & Tredeau, 1986; Mansfield et al., 1991; Maypole, 1986; Maypole & Skaine, 1982; Merit Systems Protection Board, 1981, 1988). Other factors, such as holding a low-status job, being college educated, or being a woman of color, however, have been inconsistently linked to a higher probability of experiencing sexual harassment (Gruber & Bjorn, 1982; Maypole & Skaine, 1982; Merit Systems Protection Board, 1988; Tangri, Bart, & Johnson, 1982).

MacKinnon (1979) suggested that Black women may be most vulnerable to sexual harassment because they are often economically disadvantaged, are paid less than White women, and are viewed as highly sexually accessible. In two studies, Black women working in low-status blue-collar jobs reported a greater frequency (Gruber & Bjorn, 1982; Mansfield et al., 1991) as well as greater severity of sexual harassment than did their White peers (Gruber &
Bjorn, 1982). In contrast, a study of harassment in social settings with ethnic women of color and White women revealed no significant differences between those who reported a sexually stressful incident and those who did not (DiVasto et al., 1984). Clearly, more information about the sexual harassment experiences of African American women across different settings is needed.

Variations in the definitions of sexual harassment, non-systematic data collection, non-standardized measures, and the lack of sound theoretical formulations complicate comparisons of sexual harassment prevalence across studies (Fitzgerald et al., 1988; Hotelling, 1991). Furthermore, research with random community samples that include ethnic minority populations has rarely been conducted, and few studies have investigated harassment in more than one setting.

The purpose of this study was to investigate ethnic differences in the prevalence, forms, and outcomes of sexual harassment in a variety of work and public and private social settings in a stratified community sample of African American and White American women. Potential correlates of sexual harassment experiences, such as victims’ demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, were also examined. Based on MacKinnon’s (1979) hypothesis of Black women’s increased vulnerability to sexual harassment, prevalence rates were expected to be higher for African American than White women.

METHOD

Sample Selection

We used multistage stratified probability sampling with quotas to recruit comparable samples of African American and White American women, 18 to 36 years of age in Los Angeles County, for a larger study of women’s sexual experiences in 1983. Quotas were based on the population of African American women 18 to 36 years of age, with differing levels of education, marital status, and number of children. Inclusion into the sample was based on African American and White women’s own ethnic identification (see Wyatt, 1985, for further discussion).

Random digit telephone-dialing procedures identified 1,348 households in which a woman resided (see Wyatt, 1985, for complete detail). Of those women who met the demographic criteria, 709 agreed to participate and 266 refused, resulting in a refusal rate of 27%. The first 248 women meeting the desired quotas, 126 African American and 122 White women, were interviewed (see Table 1). It was not possible to match both samples on income.
TABLE 1: Demographic Characteristics of African American and White American Women

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>African American Women (n = 126)</th>
<th>White American Women (n = 122)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Percentage^a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age range</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-26</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27-36</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11th grade or less</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school graduate</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partial college</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College graduate</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate education</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No children</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 or more^b</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ever married</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never married</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal monthly income</td>
<td>$909</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

^a. Percentages may not total 100% as a result of rounding.
^b. Significantly more White women had no children, \( \chi^2 (3, n = 111) = 12.7, p < .005 \).

The range extended from less than $5,000 to above $50,000 per year, with comparability between groups, except at very low income levels. These discrepancies between groups were also found in Los Angeles County statistics for income by ethnicity (Wyatt, 1985).

**Procedure**

Each participant was interviewed face-to-face by a trained female interviewer of the same ethnicity at the participant’s location of choice. Respondents were reimbursed $20.00 for their time and up to $2.50 for expenses. Interviews were usually conducted in two sessions and ranged in length from 3 to 8 hours. At the completion of the interview, referrals for mental health services were provided on request (for fewer than 5% of the sample).

**Instrumentation**

The Wyatt Sex History Questionnaire (WSHQ), a 478-item structured interview, was used to obtain both retrospective and current data about
women's consensual and abusive sexual experiences in childhood and adulthood, including sexual harassment. With one exception, questions were arranged chronologically from childhood to adulthood so that inconsistencies in the data become apparent and, whenever needed, immediate clarification from respondents was possible.

Sexual harassment was defined as unwanted requests, comments, or actions of a sexual nature that respondents did not welcome. Rape was not included in this definition. Women were asked whether they had ever experienced sexual harassment in work and in nonwork, noneducational settings and to describe the one experience that had the most impact on them. Additional open-ended items referred to the gender of the harasser, the victim's relationship to the harasser, and the outcome of the harassment situation.

Reliability was established for various portions of the WSHQ. Each interviewer rated the severity of each incident of sexual abuse on a 10-point scale, ranging from not severe to very severe, at the completion of an interview. Interrater reliability (using the kappa coefficient), established on a weekly basis among the four interviewers, averaged .90. When 10 audiotapes were randomly selected to be examined for accuracy of interviewers' written transcriptions of the participants' open-ended responses to questions, only two responses out of 4,780 items were noted to have been in error. Pearson correlations between demographic characteristics obtained at telephone recruitment and during the interview up to 9 months later ranged from .82 to 1.0. Demographic characteristics of participants and their parents obtained for 119 women who were reinterviewed for another study up to 2 years later (Peters, 1984) yielded test-retest correlations ranging from .65 to .98. The lowest correlation ($r = .65$) was the employment status of respondents, which tended to change between interviews. Overall, participants' responses were consistent over time, strengthening the probability that their responses to other questions were also reliable.

RESULTS

Sexual Harassment at Work

Forty-four percent of women in the sample ($N = 248$) reported sexual harassment at work. Significant relationships emerged between harassment on the job and ethnicity, current work status, and current marital status. More White women reported at least one incident of sexual harassment at work, compared with the African American women (53% versus 34%). $\chi^2(1, N = \ldots$
248) = 9.25, \( p = .002 \). Of the harassed African American women, 88% were currently working, versus 66% of the harassed White women, \( \chi^2(1, n = 108) = 6.81, \ p = .009 \). More than half of the African American women harassed at work were currently single (53%), compared with 23% of the harassed White women, \( \chi^2(2, n = 108) = 10.62, \ p = .005 \). Victims of harassment at work from the two ethnic groups did not differ from each other with regard to other demographic characteristics and type of work history. No significant differences were found between women who reported harassment versus those who did not, \( p > .05 \).

A significant relationship between the form of work harassment and ethnicity was noted. Sixty-seven percent of African American compared with 45% of White women reported having been propositioned in the workplace, \( \chi^2(2, n = 107) = 5.99, \ p = .05 \). More than half of all harassment incidents on the job (53%) involved propositions, ranging from remarks such as “Let me see how your blouse fits” and “I’ll just tear your . . . up” to promises of job promotions in exchange for sexual favors. For example, one woman reported that her employer promised to promote her if she agreed to have oral sex with him. Eighteen percent of women reported having been rubbed, kissed, fondled in some way, or having had their behinds slapped; and 29% described both verbal and physical sexual harassment. Incidents of harassment involving both verbal and physical acts included offensive sexual propositions or attempts by the harasser to embarrass or defame the woman in front of others, such as falsely implying that she had a sexual relationship with him. In addition, attempts to kiss, embrace, pinch, fondle, or rub against a woman’s body were described. In a few incidents, women reported that they became sexually involved with the harasser.

Most women reported harassment by male superiors (53%) and coworkers (33%). The remaining women (13%) were harassed by male clients or customers, or by men in subordinate positions. No significant ethnic differences in the reported relationship to the harasser emerged.

In response to being sexually harassed on the job, more than 1 in 10 African American and White women (12% and 17%, respectively) ignored the harassment and reported no emotional response; slightly less than one third of women in both ethnic groups were either fired or left the work environment (29% and 32%, respectively); 36% of African American and 23% of White women responded emotionally with disgust or hostility, but took no action; and approximately one in four African American and White women (24% and 28%, respectively) did one of the following: reprimanded the harasser, demanding that he stop the harassment; threatened him verbally, pushed or kicked him; reported him; talked to others about the harassment situation;
avoided the harasser; or helped to get the harasser fired. No significant ethnic differences in response to harassment were found.

**Sexual Harassment in Social Settings**

A total of 111 out of 248 women (45%) reported having been sexually harassed in social settings, all of them by men. Forty-seven percent of the harassed women were White and 53% were African American, \( p > .05 \). Of the harassment victims in social settings, 75% were currently working, compared with 63% of women who reported no such harassment experiences, \( \chi^2(1, N = 248) = 3.61, p = .057 \). No significant ethnic differences were noted for current work status, education, and marital status. Slightly more African American women who were harassed in social settings reported, however, that they had never worked in unskilled or skilled jobs, compared with the harassed White women (31% versus 15%), \( \chi^2(2, n = 111) = 5.07, p = .079 \). Single African American women who reported harassment in social settings were significantly more likely than the harassed single White women to have incomes at or below the poverty level (19% versus 5%), \( \chi^2(1, n = 97) = 4.55, p = .033 \).

About three out of four harassed women (79%) reported verbal harassment including catcalls, sexual propositions, vulgar comments, and obscene phone calls. Verbal harassment most often occurred on the street, in bars, in gyms, in parking lots, and at gas stations. In one example, a woman was asked by the bartender in a Southern California bar when she was going to perform a sexual act on him. When she said “probably never,” he chased, threatened, and then choked her while others looked on without interfering until she managed to get away.

Eighteen percent of women were grabbed, fondled, or propositioned and 2% experienced sexual advances from authority figures, such as therapists. For example, one woman reported that a stranger pulled the top of her dress down to her waist and made a lewd comment while she was in a bar. Of the women harassed by authority figures, one described an incident in which her psychiatrist insisted that she kiss him on his birthday and chased her around his office. For most women (73%), the harassers were strangers. Eight percent were harassed by acquaintances, 6% by neighbors, 5% by an acquaintance from work, and 4% each by friends or others. No significant ethnic differences in the form of harassment and relationship to the harasser were noted.

More than half of the women (55%) ignored the incident. Twenty-eight percent reprimanded or had someone else reprimand the harasser, 5% hit him or had someone else hit the harasser, 8% responded in other ways including breaking off contact with the harasser or retaliating by fondling the harasser,
and 5% had no emotional response to having been harassed. No significant ethnic differences were found in terms of women’s response to harassment.

DISCUSSION

This study examined the prevalence, forms, and outcomes of sexual harassment across two types of settings in a community sample of African American and White American women.

Work Settings

The 44% prevalence rate for sexual harassment at work in a community sample of women with work histories ranging from unskilled labor to professional status is consistent with previously reported prevalence rates between 30% and 50% for women in various blue-collar, white-collar, and professional occupations (e.g., Merit Systems Protection Board, 1981, 1988). This finding indicates that sexual harassment was highly prevalent in the workplace even prior to 1983 when these data were collected. Indeed, the prevalence rate of 44% may be the result of underreporting, given that public awareness of sexual harassment in 1983 was relatively limited.

More than half of the White women and slightly more than one third of the African American women in the sample reported sexual harassment on a job. Most of the harassed Black women were currently working and unmarried. Although the data do not necessarily indicate whether women were harassed on their current jobs, or in previous job settings, the findings suggest that single African American women who were currently working were at a greater risk of being sexually harassed than was their White cohort. Prior research has clearly identified single women as one of the high-risk groups for encountering sexual harassment in the workplace (e.g., Gruber & Bjorn, 1982). Because African American women have historically been devalued as sexual objects in American society (Wyatt, 1992), their vulnerability to being sexually harassed on the job may be heightened, especially when they are unmarried.

The findings that more White than African American women reported an incident of harassment, however, are in contrast to some other studies (Gruber & Bjorn, 1982; Mansfield et al., 1991) and fail to support MacKinnon’s (1979) hypothesis that Black women may be most vulnerable to sexual harassment. It is possible that African American women perceived their
experiences as insufficiently severe to meet the criteria for sexual harassment, even though the latter was clearly defined as unwanted, unwelcome requests, comments, or actions of a sexual nature. Wyatt (1990, 1992) previously found that, compared with White women, African American women tended to underreport incidents that were sexually abusive in nature, such as rape and childhood sexual abuse. Black women, who have historically been stereotyped as highly sexual and promiscuous (Getman, 1984; Wyatt, 1982), may feel that they somehow provoked unwanted incidents of a sexual nature and fear that support from community and society would be lacking upon disclosure (Wyatt, 1982). As a result, Black women may report only the most severe incidents (Burt, 1980) and tolerate seemingly less severe experiences, including sexual harassment (Wyatt, 1992). Further research with multiethnic populations to determine clearly whether women of color may be at greater risk for sexual harassment at work than White women with similar demographic characteristics is needed.

White women were more likely to be the targets of sexual harassment that included both unwanted verbal advances and unwanted touch, whereas African American women were more likely to receive unwanted verbal propositions at work. It is important to note that the content of verbal harassment can be extremely demeaning and suggestive of sexual promiscuity, which may affect a woman’s feelings as well as her reputation. Many women, and particularly African American women, experienced psychological distress and other consequences such as job loss as a result of being harassed by a superior or coworker. Nevertheless, women of both ethnic groups appeared to tolerate more subtle levels of sexual harassment at work. It is likely that many of them did not know how to remedy a sexual harassment situation effectively, either because they were unaware of potential recourse available to them or because they feared that any efforts made to discourage or end a sexual harassment situation would worsen their working conditions or jeopardize their jobs. This appears to be a realistic concern, given that the majority of harassers were superiors. Many of today’s educational efforts and guidelines for remedying sexual harassment did not exist in 1983 or earlier years. In addition, women may have tolerated harassment because they learned to accommodate to being sexually harassed in a male-dominated society. Thus they may have considered defending themselves or taking steps to rectify the situation only in exceptionally upsetting cases. Even with today’s improved methods of reporting harassment to the relevant authorities, patterns of nondisclosure may be difficult to change if women feel strongly that potential negative consequences of disclosure may outweigh its benefits.
Social Settings

This study sheds much-needed light on the occurrence of sexual harassment and victim characteristics that may increase the likelihood of harassment in social settings. Similar to the prevalence in the workplace, almost half of women, most of them currently working, were harassed in social settings. In contrast to harassment at work, however, this finding was independent of ethnicity. The results indicate that working women, regardless of ethnicity, tend to be in public more often, and on the street, in particular, where much of the harassment occurred, compared with women who do not work. Working women usually commute to work, often need to walk to and from public transportation, wait at bus stops, and may go out to lunch. For those women in the workforce who use their own cars for transportation, parking lots and gas stations are potential settings for harassment. Thus increased exposure to social situations in the everyday lives of working women may result in a greater probability of encountering sexual harassment in nonwork, social settings.

Single African American women with an income at or below the poverty level and those with a history of working in unskilled or skilled jobs were somewhat more likely to be sexually harassed in social settings than their White peers. Poor, single African American women who work in unskilled and skilled jobs may often find themselves in public places where sexual harassment occurs. This finding appears to lend some support to the notion that Black women may be more vulnerable to sexual harassment because they tend to be economically disadvantaged, which is part of MacKinnon’s (1979) hypothesis.

In social settings, more women ignored sexual harassment incidents than did women who were harassed at work. This may indicate that women are more conditioned to tolerate sexual harassment in social settings than on the job. The workplace is a more formal setting in which many women are likely to expect to be perceived in terms of their work performance rather than their sexual attributes. This expectation may not exist in social settings, however. Women may also be more likely to ignore sexual harassment in social settings because official recourse, which may exist in the work setting, is often unavailable. It may also have been easier for women to ignore unwanted verbal propositions, which were most common in social settings (79%), as opposed to incidents involving unwanted touch or a combination of unwanted touch and verbal harassment, which were more prevalent in the workplace (47%). In addition, many women may have had legitimate concerns about their physical safety, as illustrated by the example of a woman who was choked in a bar when she did not oblige her male harasser.
Few women took direct action to stop sexual harassment incidents across settings, even though many reported intense emotional reactions and grave consequences. This lack of assertive action makes it obvious that education about the recourse available in all settings in which harassment occurs was sorely needed years ago. It is hoped that today's improved sexual harassment policies and educational efforts will successfully increase women's awareness of their right to protect themselves against harassment. Women are likely to feel more confident when they become informed about recourse available to them and to benefit from learning effective strategies that ensure their safety.

As indicated by the findings of this study, sexual harassment does not only exist in women's work environments but is also pervasive in many other private and public social environments. Incidents of sexual harassment that may occur every day across several settings are likely to have a cumulative effect on women. To understand how sexual harassment affects women overall, more research with community samples must be conducted across various work and nonwork settings that are part of women's lives.

REFERENCES


Gail E. Wyatt is Professor of Medical Psychology in the Department of Psychiatry and Biobehavioral Sciences at the University of California, Los Angeles, a research scientist awardee, a certified sex therapist, and a diplomate of the American Board of Sexology. Her research examines sociocultural factors influencing sexual decision making that have an impact on psychological and sexual functioning. She lectures at national and international conferences on sex-related topics and is currently conducting cross-cultural research identifying barriers to sexual behavior change.

Monika Riederle is Staff Research Associate at the Neuropsychiatric Institute of the University of California, Los Angeles. She is also in clinical practice as a psychological assistant in Studio City, California, and has coauthored a book about women’s abusive and consensual sexual experiences with Dr. Wyatt, as well as several articles on sexual decision making and sexual harassment.