

Workplace sexual harassment 'a chronic problem,' says APA president

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Sexual harassment in the workplace is a pervasive, chronic problem that can cause enduring psychological harm, according to the president of the American Psychological Association.

"Sexual [harassment](#) in the workplace is a significant [occupational health psychology](#) problem," said APA President Antonio E. Puente, PhD.

"Psychological research has offered understanding into the causes of [workplace harassment](#), as well as some strategies for preventing or reducing it. However, there is limited research regarding the characteristics of harassers, which makes it difficult to predict who will do it and where and when it might happen. What we do know is that harassers tend to lack a social conscience and engage in manipulative, immature, irresponsible and exploitative behaviors."

Research has shown that [sexual harassment](#) is primarily aimed at women, but men are also targets of such behavior. Perpetrators of sexual harassment in the workplace are not only supervisors/superiors but are also coworkers, subordinates, customers and clients, Puente said.

According to the 2017 article "Sexual Harassment: Have We Made Any Progress?" published in APA's *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, women tend to report more adverse effects than men after experiencing workplace sexual harassment. These may include anxiety, depression, eating disorders, drug and alcohol abuse, post-traumatic stress and a lower level of overall happiness.

Women are more likely to report sexual harassment than men, according to the article, but "studies indicate that men may be at a higher risk of [mental health issues](#) and depression." Men in the military are 10 times more likely to experience sexual harassment than civilian men, but an estimated 81 percent of military men who are harassed do not report it, the articles added.

Organizational climate is a strong predictor of [workplace](#) sexual harassment and can include situations where men outnumber women, where supervisors are predominantly male, and where there is a sense among employees that complaints will not be taken seriously. Research has shown that hierarchical power dynamics are at the root of sexual harassment.

"Psychology can help, in the form of sexual harassment training, but it only works if it is part of a comprehensive, committed effort to combat the problem," Puente said. "Most research points to sanctions as the primary way that organizations can be less tolerant of harassment.

"Organizations need to be proactive in establishing policies prohibiting sexual harassment, raising employee awareness, establishing reporting procedures and educating employees about these policies. More research is needed to identify the antecedents to harassment that will help employees and managers identify and respond appropriately."

More information: "Sexual Harassment: Have We Made Any Progress?" by James Campbell Quick, PhD, University of Texas at Arlington and University of Manchester, and M. Ann McFadyen, PhD, University of Texas at Arlington. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, Vol. 22, No. 3, 2017. www.apa.org/pubs/journals/rels/ocp-ocp0000054.pdf

Provided by American Psychological Association

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