I have undertaken research in the area of sexual harassment workplace over the past 20 years, focusing on gender and race, with publications in academic journals and books. There are a few issues that I feel are essential in taking forward any policy on the survey of rates of sexual harassment and any interventions to deal with the area effectively:

1) Rates of Sexual Harassment – this is one of the key issues but one of the most complex when determining the prevalence of sexual harassment in the workplace. This is such a complex issue that unless it is undertaken correctly you will always have a skewed response. For example, many women will not report or claim to have experienced sexual harassment because they are embarrassed and feel guilty (as with any sexual crime the victim feels a degree of responsibility), concerned that they will be seen as weak, worried that they will be victimised by the perpetrator or members of the ‘boys club’, or they do not deem their experience as serious enough to report.

In Europe between 17 per cent and 81 per cent of employed women reported experiencing some form of sexual harassment in the workplace. A study for the Ministry of Defence asked more broadly about sexualised behaviours by providing a list of possible behaviours, asking if the respondent had experienced any of them, if they regarded them as sexual harassment and if they personally found them offensive. This produced a high incidence rate of sexually harassing behaviours reported. The issue of estimates of sexual harassment is further complicated by how these definitions are used to underpin the conceptual framing of sexual harassment, i.e. as an individual problem, rather than as systematic organisational and social consequences. One of the most interesting findings of studies is that is that far more respondents report seeing sexual harassment in the workplace that those reporting experiencing it.

In order to ensure that your statistics are a true reflection of the incidents of sexual harassment there needs to be more investment in collecting the data from organisations. For example, the culture of an organisation is a major factor in supporting sexual harassment, either by inaction or inappropriate actions. The impact of this can only be truly understood through in-depth data collection methods, such as interviews, focus groups etc. The only way to fully appreciate the experiences of victims of sexual harassment in any organisation is not just have a list of behaviours but to look at how individuals view those behaviours, how they are responding to those behaviours and how those around them respond to such behaviours. Such data can establish if individuals would tick a box that said that had experienced sexual harassment in any of its forms, from which it can be extrapolated how accurate the reported prevalence rates are and how they can be adjusted to reflect the actual experiences of individuals in the organisation.
2) An understanding of who are the victims of sexual harassment, who the perpetrators are and what the impact is will depend on a range of factors dependent on the different demographics of those involved. For example, the ground breaking work I undertook looking at racialized sexual harassment revealed a whole range of specific factors related to the experiences of different racial groups. In addition, one of the most vulnerable groups was found to be employees with a disability, or long-term illness, and they were five times more likely to have experienced sexual harassment than employees without a disability. This again cannot be achieved simply by a survey it needs to be in-depth, so that the nuances specific to different groups can be identified and understood. Research in this area of different vulnerable groups is very poor and many of these groups have not been considered at all. For example, the experiences of those with different disabilities were likely to differ considerably based on the research that has looked at the different employment experiences of those with physical or mental health disabilities. They only way to enables the development of far more effective policies that protect vulnerable individuals, both in terms of demographics and occupational status, is to understand their experiences of sexual harassment. If you do not know what they require from a policy how can you write one that achieves culture change, or increases individual’s confidence in the protection that is given by the policy. All you can do is maintain the status quo of policies, without investment into such research policies cannot address the specific needs of different vulnerable groups.

3) Again the conceptual framing of sexual harassment in the workplace is a major inhibitor to the effectiveness of government and organisational policies, i.e. as an individual problem, rather than as systematic organisational and social consequences. As stated above, this is mostly due to a lack of understanding into individuals experiences, not only of the actual act of sexual harassment but of the legislative, organisational and social responses and approaches to sexual harassment. The only way for the government select committee to make radical changes is to investigate the specific needs of different groups in the workplace. The other area that our knowledge of is appallingly lacking is that of the perpetrator. In an extensive review of the literature on sexual harassment undertaken for the Human Rights and Equality Commission, we found that there was almost no research into perpetrators. It seems ridiculous that we are trying to deal with a phenomenon where only one half of those involved are understood (to some degree at least). To develop effective policies that deal with both victim and perpetrator there must be research undertaken to address this serious gap in our knowledge.

4) Behaviour change workshops, run in a manner that actually achieves change (proved through evaluation over time) are difficult to design and run effectively. Only someone who has in-depth knowledge of sexual harassment is suitable to undertake this, yet organisations think they can run courses that only provide information on what sexual harassment is and
expect things to change. In the review of the literature I undertook for the Human Rights and Equality Commission, there were very few studies which had evaluated the outcomes of programmes designed to address sexual harassment in organisations. These were not particularly well designed. In order to understand what makes an effective change programme, a course needs to be developed, piloted and evaluated comprehensively so that it can be provided to organisations. Although evidence suggests that training can be effective, its quality and the underlying culture of the organisation are both crucial. If the training provided does not aim to address sexual harassment in an appropriate way, then it may do more harm than good. If everyone receives the same socialisation and training programmes in an essentially autocratic organisation, without sufficient effort to reform the culture, then it is possible for negative behaviours to be perpetuated and accepted as the norm. The evaluation of such programmes, once developed, could be provided free on the government web site so all organisations could access evaluation material.

I must raise here the issue of the Army, who produced a sexual harassment report in 2015. On the release of this report, I contacted the person responsible for taking action to deal with the very serious problems the report highlighted. I explained why my colleagues and I were highly suitable to help them develop a programme to achieve real change in the organisation. Discussions continued for several weeks and just as we were about to agree a meeting everything ceased. I still do not know if anything has actually been done to address the issues raised but by doing nothing the Army is leaving itself wide open to criticism and legal action. It seems appalling that nothing has been done, especially as the report was more or less the same as the one they produced in 2006, which again they did nothing to address the situation.

5) The design of reporting structures and training for those involved in the reporting and investigation of sexual harassment need to understand the specific issues relating to different groups. For example, my work on racialized sexual harassment highlighted that, for some racial groups, it is not only the impact at work the feared but from their community. One woman was told by her husband not to report the sexual harassment, as the perpetrator was a significant member of the local community and could negatively impact their lives through that community. Again, how can reporting structures be really effective in dealing with those from different groups when the experiences of individuals within those groups are not understood, especially vulnerable groups.

6) Understanding sexual harassment and what can be done to change attitudes and behaviours in the workplace is crucial, if those in the organisation are to work in a safe and healthy environment. Organisations need to make it very clear that NO sexual harassment of any kind will be tolerated and the perpetrators of such crimes will suffer severe consequences. Organisations also need to be mindful that the only route for many victims of sexual harassment is to report their experiences is through the organisation hierarchies that
allowed such acts to be perpetrated. Organisations need to be proactive rather than having a reactive strategy to sexual harassment policies and procedures. Sexual harassment is a crime like any other and needs to be treated as such.

**Key Points**

* Sexual harassment is endemic in the workplace.
* Anyone regardless of age, appearance, disability, gender, race, religion, sexual orientation etc. can be the victim of sexual harassment.
* In order to stop sexual harassment you first have to understand exactly what it is.
* Explanations for sexual harassment are complex and multi-faceted, the go beyond just power.
* In practice, many forms of sexual harassment are in fact criminal offenses, ignorance is not a defence.
* The organisation is accountable for its employees’ actions.
* Do not punish victims of sexual harassment by a lack of support or action against perpetrators.
* Research is essential if policy, training, reporting and action is to be effective for individuals from different groups.

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