

**Sexual Harassment in Work Organizations:
A View From the Twenty-First Century**

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in press

Fitzgerald, L.F. & Cortina, L.M. (in press). Sexual harassment in work organizations: A view from the twenty-first century. In J.W. White & C. Travis (Eds.), Handbook on the Psychology of Women. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

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The explosion of interest and research in sexual harassment, much of it dating to the 1990's and early 2000's, continues to demonstrate that its parameters are broader and more pervasive than originally thought. Women and girls are harassed not only in their workplaces and universities (Fitzgerald, Shullman, et al., 1988; Rospenda, Richman, & Shannon, 2009), but also in public by strangers (Davidson, et al., 2016), in their homes and apartments by landlords (Tester, 2008; Reed, et al., 2003), in high school by teachers and peers (Hill & Pearl, 2011) and even in middle school (*Davis v. Monroe County Board of Education*, 1999; Rinehart, Doshi, & Espelage, 2014). Nurses are harassed by physicians (Williams, 1996) and female physicians by patients (Phillips & Schneider, 1993), service workers by customers (Gettman & Gelfand, 2007); hotel maids by guests (Kensbock, et al., 2015), and female inmates by correctional officers (Bell, et al., 1999). Harassment reaches down into middle schools, where it blends into more general bullying, and up the age scale into nursing homes (Levine, 2003), where it is characterized as 'elder abuse', thus obscuring its often sexual nature. Technology continues to provide new methods and venues for harassment (e.g., cell phones, video games, the internet, untraceable message services; Barak, 2005) while the pervasive sexualization of youth culture, concomitant change in gendered sexual norms, and even the emergence of

sexualized forms of non-sex work¹ have rendered the models, as well as mores, of even the last decade increasingly irrelevant.

It is thus with some regret that we limit our present review to the classic issue of sexual harassment in work organizations. The reasons for this choice are many; as always, practicality and issues of space loom large; equally important, however, the sheer heterogeneity and complexity that has emerged across the last 3 decades humbles any attempt at comprehensive summary much less “grand theory”. Such a project, though desirable and possibly ripe, is far too ambitious to be attempted here.

Theoretical frame

We emphasize that our present effort is grounded in a particular feminist worldview that suggests sexual harassment in the workplace is fundamentally, even paradigmatically, a women’s issue. This perspective neither denies nor diminishes the fact that men can be and sometimes are harassed, nor that women of color face additional issues that intersect, complicate and sometimes over-determine their experiences of harassment. We recognize the widespread, often sexual, sometimes deadly harassment suffered by LGBT individuals, as well as the myriad ways that various groups of people are degraded and tormented simply because they are “different”.

Yet, we believe that any time a woman is sexually harassed, it is because she is a woman, whatever else she may be. When men are harassed, it is generally because they are perceived to be feminized, non-traditional, weak, gay, effeminate, or in some other way “not man enough” (e.g., Berdahl, 2007; *Oncala v Sundowner Offshore*

¹Brents & Sanders (2010) provide a fascinating discussion of the “mainstreaming” of the sex industry. They note “The sexualization of work is particularly noticeable in studies of the tourism, beauty, leisure, and restaurant industries” (2010, p. 45); the *Hooters* restaurant chain being only the most obvious example.

Services, Inc. (1998); said differently, they are harassed as not-men, in other words, as women. This perspective informs our efforts here.

It should go without saying that, by this, we do not mean harassment is solely a women's problem nor that women alone have the responsibility for solving it. Sexual harassment, targeted at women because they are women and at men largely because they are not-men, at lesbians because they are not heterosexual, at women of color because they are not white as well as female is a particular incarnation of a societal-level pattern of dominance and oppression by the powerful of those seen as Other. Like Otherness, power takes many forms: organizational, social, gender, psychological, and physical; it thus requires interventions on multiple levels by multiple actors, policies, and groups. From this wider-lensed perspective, sexual harassment can be seen as a particularized, gendered example of the larger social issue of power relations.

Overview

We begin with the intertwined issues of definition and prevalence, moving then to discuss causes, both individual and organizational. We next examine harassment's consequences, the price that women (and society) pay for this ubiquitous social problem, and then review the multiple ways that women resist and cope. We turn then to solutions, primarily organizational, reviewing what constitutes a robust organizational prevention program, and conclude with a discussion of unanswered and sometimes as yet un-asked questions, in hope of stimulating further discussion and investigation.

Definition and prevalence of sexual harassment in the workplace

No one knows how widespread harassment is. The question of prevalence – and how to determine it – has bedeviled this area of research since its inception; even today, there are no “gold standard” statistics for what is generally acknowledged to be a problem of enormous proportions. Much of this uncertainty rests on issues of definition and measurement, as well as the somewhat uneasy relationship between harassment research and the law.

As with rape, sexual harassment is both a legal concept and an experience, and it is important to recognize that these are not the same². Sexual harassment, though generally not a crime, is legally defined as a civil violation of various Titles of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (as amended in 1980), which prohibit discrimination in employment, housing, and education. Most states have similar laws and prohibitions, but as with federal law, none of these are stated in strictly behavioral terms; rather, the most widely known “definition” is that issued by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in 1980:

“Unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature constitutes sexual harassment when: 1. submission to such conduct is made either explicitly or implicitly a term or condition of an individual's employment, 2. submission to or rejection of such conduct by an individual is used as the basis for employment decisions affecting such individual, or 3. such 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)

² A number of commentators have noted that the focus on whether particular incidents of sexual harassment meet or are capable of meeting requirements for organizational or legal charges has dominated the discussion of harassment to the detriment of the ability to take appropriate action. We agree.

Although it could be argued that this definition reflects a generalized description of prohibited behavior, it has been left mainly to the courts to “operationalize” these guidelines (e.g., *Meritor Savings Bank v. Vinson*, 1986; *Harris v. Forklift Systems*, 1991; *Faragher vs. the City of Boca Raton*, 1998) and over the years, various legal decisions have fleshed out the parameters of what is required for something to be legally cognizable as sexual harassment. While doing so, the law has introduced various considerations (e.g., statutes of limitations, issues of welcomeness, liability, procedural requirements) that frame the scope of the legal charge.

Unlike the courts, behavioral science does not primarily concern itself with whether any particular situation can meet these considerations³. Researchers conceptualize sexual harassment *behaviorally* so as to measure its incidence reliably. Although early surveys employed the “laundry list” approach, that is, a string of behaviors chosen with little obvious rationale, these soon gave way to a more theory-based approach. Till (1980) produced a 5-category⁴ classification rooted in the experiences of hundreds of university women around the country; operationalizing these categories via a 28-item scale, Fitzgerald and her colleagues [Fitzgerald, Shullman, et al., 1988; Sexual Experiences Questionnaire (SEQ)⁵] determined that the universe of harassing conduct could more

³ One exception is the concept of unwelcomeness; as Chief Justice Rehnquist famously wrote: “The gravamen of any sexual harassment claim is that the alleged sexual advances were ‘unwelcome’”. (*Meritor Savings Bank v. Vinson*, 1986) Behavior that is welcome to the recipient is by definition not harassing, and the concept of offensiveness or non-reciprocity is incorporated into every research measure of harassment.

⁴Till’s (1980) original categories were labeled as gender harassment; seductive behavior, sexual bribery, sexual coercion, and sexual assault.

⁵Over the years, the original scale has undergone various revisions, the latest of which can be found in Stark et al. (2002).

parsimoniously be accounted for by three broad categories: gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention, and sexual coercion.

*Gender*⁶ *harassment* aims not to elicit sexual cooperation, but rather expresses insulting, degrading, or contemptuous attitudes about women; its essence is contempt and hostility, causing some writers to label it *gender hostility*. “Garden variety” gender harassment, a sub-category sometimes labeled sexist hostility, includes “woman-bashing” jokes, insults about their competence, the irrelevance or sexual unattractiveness of older women, and comments that women have no place in certain kinds of jobs. A more pernicious form of gender harassment (sexual hostility) is both more clearly sexual and obviously hostile (referring to women by degraded names for female body parts, pornographic images, crude comments about female sexuality or sexual activity). Note that such behavior need not have individual women as its target; this sexualized variant of gender harassment can involve the gratuitous sexualization of an entire work setting (e.g., sexually offensive graffiti, posters, screen savers, cartoons).

Recent research has identified additional expressions of gender harassment (Konik & Cortina, 2008; Leskinen & Cortina, 2014). One is gender policing, which expresses contempt for women who step out of place by violating standards of stereotypical femininity. Examples include scorn for those not behaving or appearing “womanly” enough or who display traditionally masculine interests. This gender-policing behavior echoes the misconduct described in *Price Waterhouse v. Hopkins* (1989).⁷ This

⁶Issues of terminology are theoretically and politically complex. It is arguable whether “gender” is the appropriate term here or whether it should be “sex” or something more complicated (e.g., “gender/sex” or “sex/gender”; see Schellenberg & Kaiser, this volume). However, as the term “gender harassment” is so well-established in the literature, we continue to use it here.

⁷*Price Waterhouse v. Hopkins* revolved around firm partnership being withheld from Ann Hopkins, despite her exceptional qualifications. To increase chances of future promotion, leadership advised Hopkins to “walk more femininely, talk more femininely, dress more femininely, wear make-up, have her hair styled, and wear jewelry” (*Price Waterhouse v. Hopkins*, 1989, p. 235). These and other comments implied that the company had placed Hopkins’ candidacy on hold because her behavior and appearance had violated the prescriptions of traditional femininity. The U.S. Supreme Court ultimately ruled that the adverse employment decision had been driven by “sex stereotyping,” in breach of Title VII.

was a “sex stereotyping” rather than “sexual harassment” case, but such conduct can and does escalate into harassment. Another recently identified aspect of gender harassment is work/family policing, which regulates boundaries between work (as a space where women are unfit and unwelcome) and home (where women belong, especially when parenting). Hostility towards women who combine work and family is a widespread reality, examples including comments about women’s “proper” place in the home and mothers not being dependable workers (Leskinen & Cortina, 2014).

Studies repeatedly show that gender harassment, whether alone or combined with other behaviors, is the most widespread form of sexual harassment (Mazzeo, Bergman, Buchanan, Drasgow & Fitzgerald, 2001; Langhout et al., 2005; Leskinen, Cortina & Kabat, 2011). Gender harassment reinforces the point that sexual harassment is fundamentally about gendered systems of power, not romance or desire. As feminist legal scholar Vicki Schultz once observed, “much of the time, harassment assumes a form that has little or nothing to do with sexuality but everything to do with gender” (Schultz, 1998, p. 1687).

Unwanted sexual attention is exactly that: sexual advances that are uninvited, unwanted and unreciprocated by the recipient. These include both verbal and physical behaviors, including sexually suggestive comments and compliments, attempts to establish sexual or romantic relationships, and unwanted touching. Although unwelcome, annoying and worse⁸, such experiences are not explicitly linked to any job condition or consideration.

Many women report both unwanted sexual attention and gender harassment, a seemingly unintuitive combination which may be at least partially an artifact of surveys

⁸ In addition to verbal approaches, unwanted sexual attention can include groping, grabbing, holding, sexual assault, and attempted or completed rape.

that confound multiple incidents when asking women about *their* experiences on the job, thus “collapsing” over incidents and perpetrators. Examining the single “situation that made the most impression”, Mazzeo and her colleagues (Mazzeo, Bergman, Buchanan, Drasgow & Fitzgerald, 2001) found that when harassment is assessed at the level of a specific meaningful experience, sexist hostility alone (40.6%), sexual hostility alone (19.1%), and unwanted sexual attention (14.4%) were the most frequent patterns. (p. 128). These are likely more meaningful estimates, and illustrate the importance of attention to the “level” of measurement, as patterns that characterize aggregate experiences rarely typify specific ones.

Finally, *sexual coercion*, long thought to be the paradigmatic harassment experience, is a relatively rare situation in which unwanted sexual attention is combined with various job-related pressures, such as bribes, and/or threats to force acquiescence (e.g., offering or implying a promotion in exchange for sexual favors, threatening termination unless sexual demands are met). Such incidents combine the categories of sexual bribery and sexual coercion/threat delineated in Till’s (1980) conceptualization. Simply put, sexual coercion and/or unwanted sexual attention represent “come-ons,” whereas gender harassment is a “put-down” (Fitzgerald et al., 1995). However they may be labeled, each of these situations fall under the larger umbrella of sexual harassment as it is currently understood.

We emphasize here that we use the term *sexual harassment* to refer to a pattern of experience, not a legal finding of fact; any and all forms of the conduct described above can violate anti-discrimination laws, providing they meet specific legal criteria (frequency, severity, unwelcomeness, and the like); however, it is important to recognize that the

prevalence of sexually harassing experiences in women's lives is far greater than the number of legal cases, EEOC filings, or organizational complaints might suggest.

Although samples and methods vary considerably, major prevalence studies over the past 30 years converge to suggest that one of every two women encounters some form of harassing behavior during her working life. Recent research suggests that this number may actually be an underestimate; in one of the only truly national studies, Rospenda, Richman and Shannon (2009) reported that one of every two women in their sample had been harassed in the previous year alone. Such conduct can be top-down (coming from those in authority), bottom-up (coming from subordinates, sometimes termed "contra-power" harassment), or customer-driven; most commonly, though, sexual harassment comes from coworkers. Figures are predictably higher in male-dominated occupations in which the job duties and tasks are those traditionally performed by men (e.g., the military, police work, firefighting) and where women have historically been few. In truth, it is impossible to say with certainty how widespread workplace harassment is; the evidence, however, suggests that it is ubiquitous, the most widespread of all forms of violence against women, often including other forms within its reach (e.g., sexual assault, interpersonal violence, stalking). As MacKinnon (1979) wrote over 3 decades ago: "(S)exual harassment is less 'epidemic' than endemic" (p.55); that is, a natural and enduring characteristic of women's lives.

Causes of Workplace Sexual Harassment

Why do men harass women?⁹ When sexual harassment first reached public consciousness as a social problem, many seemed to believe that it was an aberration perpetrated by deviant individuals who suffered from some type of psychological problem. Alternatively, it was suggested that only certain “classes” of men harass; generally, uneducated, blue collar individuals who could be expected to be “rough” or “uncouth”¹⁰. As it turns out, neither of these is the case. Although researchers have attempted to identify a pattern of easily recognizable demographic or interpersonal characteristics that characterize the typical harasser, such attempts have met with limited success. Although it is certainly true that some individuals are more likely to harass than others, research suggests that this propensity is largely grounded in attitudes towards sexuality, hostile sexism, and beliefs about proper roles for men and women, characteristics not necessarily immediately apparent (Pryor, 1987; Pryor, LaVite, & Stoller, 1993). As Pina, Gannon and Saunders (2009) observe: “Given these research findings, it may be misleading to generate a typical profile of the sexual harasser based upon socio-demographic factors. Sexual harassers appear to permeate all social strata, occupational levels, and age categories.” (p.129)

It is by now largely accepted in the scientific community that it is organizational conditions rather than individual characteristics that are the most powerful predictors of

⁹ This question can be addressed on many levels; as noted above, we limit ourselves here to the specific issue of harassment in work organizations, and thus focus our attention on organizational causes and precipitants, while acknowledging that individual and societal factors play non-trivial roles, particularly in non-organizationally situated harassment (e.g., street harassment, housing).

¹⁰ This perspective was prominent in media and other accounts during various high-profile events in the early 1990’s, such as the Clarence Thomas confirmation hearings, the scandal surrounding Senator Bob Packwood, and Richard Berendzen, who stepped down as President of American University in 1990.

sexual harassment (Hulin, et al., 1996; Ilies, et al., 2003; Pryor, et al., 1993; for a meta-analysis of this body of work, see Willness, Steel, & Lee, 2007). Organizations that are characterized by a skewed gender ratio (i.e., most employees are male, and women are relatively few), job duties and tasks that are historically masculine in nature, and organizational tolerance of offensive behavior typically have far greater problems with sexual harassment. Organizational tolerance (sometimes known as organizational climate) is the single most powerful factor in determining whether sexual harassment will occur and will be damaging when it does. Studies have shown that strict management norms and a climate that does not tolerate offensive behavior can inhibit harassment even by those with a propensity to do so (Fitzgerald, Hulin, et al. 1997; Pryor, et al., 1993; Willness et al., 2007). This is not to say that individual deviance plays no role, nor that some individuals may not be largely immune to either education or consequences; taken as a whole, however, the data consistently show that organizations can inhibit and reduce harassment if they make the effort to do so¹¹.

Consequences of Workplace Sexual Harassment

Once sexual harassment was recognized as a serious social problem, attention turned to its outcomes. Early studies, such as those conducted in the 1980s by the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (USMSPB, 1981, 1988), had a powerful impact on subsequent research, demonstrating that sexual harassment is a widespread experience that brings real harm to women's lives. Many of these initial studies, however, were hampered by inadequate definitions of harassment, non-standardized measurement

¹¹ In recent years, the individual differences issue has been revisited from a social cognitive perspective (MacDonald, 2012; Page & Pina, 2015) focusing more on the facilitative cognitive processes and self-protective mechanisms of high likelihood perpetrators. Space precludes us from pursuing this theoretically interesting perspective here.

tools, or reliance on samples of convenience. The scientific landscape changed dramatically over the next few decades, as psychologists documented the many ways in which sexual harassment can harm women, men, their workgroups and their organizations. We briefly summarize that research here.

Emotional and psychological consequences. Numerous studies document that offensive sex-related behavior has serious emotional consequences; although early efforts were based largely on reports of self-identified victims, and thus could be criticized on these grounds, a number of rigorous investigations subsequently confirmed that sexually harassing experiences can cause substantial emotional damage, even when such experiences are less serious and intense than those typically required to trigger statutory relief. Among the first of these studies to appear, Schneider, Swan, and Fitzgerald (1997) surveyed women employed in two different organizations; they examined the impact of harassment on a variety of reliable and valid measures of psychological status, carefully controlling for the effects of other stressors or confounding influences. Their results demonstrated that the experience of sexual harassment exerted significant and substantial impact; women who had been harassed had significantly lower levels of general psychological wellbeing as well as elevated symptoms of post-traumatic stress. The impact of harassment remained significant even when controlling for other potential explanations; as the authors observed, “This study presents evidence that sexual harassment, even at relatively low frequencies, exerts significant negative impact on women’s psychological well-being” (p. 412). Over the next two decades, researchers produced nearly 200 studies, documenting the nature and severity of the harm harassment does to women, including decrements in general mental health (Fitzgerald,

Drasgow, Hulin, Gelfand, and Magley, 1997), depression and anxiety disorders (Ho, Dinh, Bellefontaine, & Irving, 2012; Reed, Collinsworth, & Fitzgerald, 2016); increased incidence of alcohol abuse (Rospenda, Fujishiro, Shannon, & Richman, 2008); elevated risk of eating disorders (Harned & Fitzgerald, 2002); and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (Ho, et al., 2012; Willness, et al., 2007). Dionisi, Barling, and Dupres (2012) reported that all forms of sexual harassment were more strongly associated with decrements in psychological well-being than other forms of workplace aggression.

Some of the most compelling research in this area can be found in studies linking sexual harassment not only to psychological distress (i.e., symptoms) but also to actual diagnosable psychological disorder (e.g., major depressive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder). Based on a large, nationally representative random sample and state-of-the-art diagnostic techniques, Dansky and Kilpatrick (1997) reported that women who had experienced sexual harassment were significantly more likely to suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Major Depressive Disorder than other women. In a similar vein, Fitzgerald and her colleagues (Fitzgerald, Buchanan, et al., 1999) found that the most common diagnoses found among harassment plaintiffs were Major Depressive Disorder and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Magruder, et al. (2015) reported that the incidence of diagnosable PTSD was associated with exposure to sexual harassment and discrimination among female Vietnam-era veterans.

Not surprisingly, the discussion of differential diagnosis becomes more heated in the context of litigation. Fitzgerald, Collinsworth, and Lawson (2013) recently summarized this discussion:

“Defense attorneys and their associated experts...are wont to proclaim that the plaintiff cannot have PTSD unless she (was) sexually assaulted, thus

oversimplifying a complex topic and ignoring symptom patterns that are identical to that of PTSD. Treating therapists and plaintiffs' experts, on the other hand, have been perhaps too ready to invoke, with only sketchy justification, the PTSD label for reactions to experiences that bear little resemblance to classical notions of traumatic stress (for the clearest statement of this position, see Long, 1994). The mental health profession makes its own contribution to this controversy through its ambivalent relationship to the diagnosis, as exemplified by the ever-changing formulations of criterion A and continuing concern about "bracket creep" (McNally, 2003) (Fitzgerald, et al., 2013, p. 82).

Outside the legal arena, trauma researchers are generally more practical; for example, the National Center for PTSD refers on its website to "Post Traumatic Stress symptoms" (ptss) thus re-focusing the issue on its substance rather than technical diagnostic and legal controversies. We agree with this approach, emphasizing that victims of sexual harassment frequently experience the full symptom picture of PTSD, absent the classic "risk of death or bodily injury" criterion beloved of purists. (See also Avina & Donohue, 2002).

In sum, a large body of reliable data demonstrate that experiencing sexual harassment, even at low levels of frequency and intensity, can lead to decrements in psychological well-being and elevations in psychological distress, up to and including major emotional disorders. Although not every individual who is exposed to such experiences will develop symptoms of emotional distress, such reactions are more common than not – indeed, they appear to be the normative response.

Professional consequences. Dozens of studies have made clear that sexual harassment also takes a toll on women's work lives. Across a wide range of industries, researchers find that encounters with sexual harassment on the job predict reductions in job satisfaction (e.g., Fitzgerald et al., 1997; Lim & Cortina 2005; Lonsway et al., 2013). This finding applies not only to white American civilians, but also U.S. military personnel,

women of color in the U.S., and women in other nations (e.g., Canada, Mainland China, Hong Kong, Turkey). For meta-analytic reviews of this work, see Chan, Lam, Chow and Cheung (2008), Lapierre, Spector and Leck (2005), and Willness, Steel and Lee (2007).

Organizational withdrawal is another common consequence of sexual harassment. Many harassed women engage in some form of *work withdrawal*, remaining in their job but disengaging from it (via absenteeism, tardiness, neglect of assignments, etc.). Others contemplate more complete forms of withdrawal—quitting their jobs altogether (e.g., O’Connell & Korabik 2000; Schneider et al., 1997; Shupe et al., 2002). Indeed, when Sims, Drasgow and Fitzgerald (2005) followed military servicewomen over a 4-year time-span, and correlated their experiences with administrative records, they found that harassed women had exited military employment at higher rates than other women. This organizational withdrawal is often interpreted as a method of escaping an abusive situation; it is a highly effective method, but one that comes with considerable costs—social, professional, and financial.

Sexual harassment also detracts from productivity and performance, as shown through both surveys (Barling et al., 2001; Magley et al. 1999; Raver & Gelfand, 2005) and experimental studies (Woodzicka & LaFrance 2005). In addition, as sexual harassment increases, organizational commitment decreases (e.g., Magley et al., 2005; Schneider et al., 1997) and job stress increases (e.g., Cortina et al. 2002; Lim & Cortina 2005; Magley et al., 2005). Other job-related correlates of sexual harassment include impaired team relationships, increased team conflicts, lower team financial performance, lowered justice perceptions, cognitive difficulties (e.g., distraction), and over-performance

demands (defined as perceptions of the “need to over-perform to gain acceptance and recognition within the workplace”, Parker & Griffin, 2002).

Health-related consequences. Compared to the body of work on psychological and professional outcomes, less research has addressed relationships between sexual harassment and women’s physical health. Such effects are often indirect, mediated through mental health. A number of studies have documented links to overall *health perceptions and satisfaction* (e.g., Bergman & Drasgow, 2003; Fitzgerald et al. 1997; Lim & Cortina 2005). Others have identified specific somatic complaints associated with harassing experiences; these include headaches, exhaustion, sleep problems, gastric problems, nausea, respiratory complaints, musculoskeletal pain, and weight loss/gain (e.g., Barling et al., 1996; de Haas et al., 2009; Piotrkowski, 1998). In the only study of its kind, Schneider et al. (2001) conducted an experiment showing that experiences of even mild gender harassment cause increased cardiovascular reactivity.

Issues of Severity, Labeling, and Targeting

Importantly, psychological and professional damage arise from sexual harassment regardless of the *type* of conduct involved. Gender harassment is often assumed, by definition, to be less “severe” than unwanted sexual attention because it lacks explicitly sexual content (i.e., sexual interest, advances, or threat); this perspective confounds severity with type of harassment and badly misstates the nature of women’s experience. Although it is the case that much gender harassment has no explicitly sexual content (e.g., sexist jokes, derisive terms of address, and other forms of verbal abuse), such

harassment can nevertheless be remarkably severe¹² (e.g., *Hall vs. Gus Construction Company, 1988*; *Jenson, et al., vs. Eveleth Mines, 19xx*). Such behaviors constitute “sexual” harassment not because they involve sexuality but because they are sex-based, that is, they would not have occurred “but for” the sex of the target.¹³

Women faced with “just” gender harassment show significant decrements in professional and psychological health – including performance declines (Leskinen et al., 2011). One study even found that frequent and pervasive gender harassment is as offensive, disturbing, and corrosive to women’s work and wellbeing as infrequent sexual coercion (Langhout et al., 2005). Moreover, a recent meta-analysis reported significantly *stronger* effects for high-frequency/low-intensity experiences (e.g., gender harassment) than for low-frequency/high-intensity experiences (e.g., unwanted sexual attention, sexual coercion); this pattern held when predicting women’s job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and general health perceptions and symptoms (Sojo, Wood & Genat, 2016).

Findings such as these support Leskinen and colleagues’ (2011) recommendations that law and social science move away from privileging unwanted sexual pursuit as “the essence of harassment” (Schultz, 1998, p. 1716). As Sojo et al. (2016, p. 22) explain,

Sexual coercion and unwanted sexual attention are traumatic for the people involved, and more likely to result in court cases and public reporting...However, the more frequent, less intense, and often unchallenged gender harassment, sexist discrimination, sexist organizational climate...[appears] at least as detrimental for women’s well-being. They should not be considered lesser forms of sexism.

¹² Organizational and scholarly euphemisms such as “sexist” comments and “requests for sexual favors” sanitize and obscure the ugly reality of workplace harassment; interested readers are referred to relevant court decisions – easily available online – for a more realistic view.

¹³ *Hicks v. Gates Rubber Company, 198x*; *McKinney v. Dole, 1985*; *Hall vs. Gus Construction Company, 1988*.

Likewise, it is important to note that the victim need neither recognize nor label her experience as “sexual harassment” for it to be harmful. Surprising to many, labeling is considerably less frequent than supposed: over half of working women report being targeted with sexually harassing conduct at work, but among those targets, less than 25% consider their experience to constitute “sexual harassment” per se (e.g., Ilies et al. 2003; Magley et al. 1999; Magley & Shupe 2005). Those who face gender harassment – in the absence of unwanted sexual advances – are even less likely to attach the sexual harassment label to their experiences (Holland & Cortina, 2013; Magley & Shupe 2005). Nonetheless, sexual harassment victims who do and do not self-label suffer similar psychological, occupational, and health-related harms (Magley et al. 1999; Munson, Miner & Hulin, 2001; Woodzicka & LaFrance 2005).

Finally, we note that one need not be directly targeted with sexual harassment to feel its effects. That is, studies find that the circle of harm extends to both witnesses and workgroups. For instance, Schneider (1996) found that observing or hearing about the sexual harassment of a female coworker fosters *bystander stress*, which predicts lower satisfaction with coworkers, supervisors, life, and mental health. Similarly, Glomb et al. (1997) found that women facing *ambient sexual harassment* (i.e., targeted at others in their work group) reported negative outcomes that parallel those of direct sexual harassment victims. Likewise, Raver and Gelfand (2005) reported that ambient sexual harassment in work teams predicted greater team conflict, lower team cohesion, and reductions in team financial performance. Finally, Miner-Rubino and Cortina (2004, 2007) found that employees who observed sexually harassing conduct toward women also described lower well-being, which translated into higher organizational withdrawal;

importantly, these effects emerged for *both* female and male employees. In all of these studies, second-hand experiences of sexual harassment (i.e., in the ambient environment or workgroup) linked with employee outcomes even *after* controlling for first-hand, personally targeted experiences. This body of scholarship demonstrates the wide-ranging damage that sexual harassment inflicts. It is a problem with relevance not only to perpetrators, victims, and women – but rather to entire organizations.

Coping with Sexual Harassment

What was originally a puzzle has now become a truism: despite the ubiquity of workplace harassment, the great majority of victims never complain to their employers and many never tell anyone of their experiences. In the past, and sometimes still, this reticence has been taken as implying that the situation never happened, the complainant herself was complicit, or “it couldn’t have been that bad”. Otherwise, “Why didn’t she just report him?” (Fitzgerald, et al., 1995). As research began to examine women’s responses, however, it became apparent that this formulation was seriously flawed; that responding to harassment was a process, not a single act; and that there are numerous ways in which victims attempt to manage their situation, of which formal reporting is typically the last resort.

The earliest line of research in this area focused on identifying these different responses, yielding a number of schemes for classifying them (e.g., Maypole, 1986; Terpstra & Baker, 1989). Reminiscent of the “reporting” controversy, these systems focused mainly on the degree to which the woman responded assertively. Although useful as a starting point, such frameworks were not derived from the reactions of actual victims, but rather based on rational derivation or, problematically, the written responses

of research participants to brief descriptions of hypothetical situations. Given that actual victims have been shown to behave quite differently than research participants or the general public believe they would behave (Woodzicka & LaFrance, 2001; Brinkman, Kelly, & Rickard, 2011), such systems were not particularly helpful in understanding the behavior of women who had actually been harassed. Woodzicka and LaFrance (2001) studied how research participants responded to sexual harassment in the context of a simulated job interview; they reported that although the participants predicted they would confront a harasser in some way (e.g., refusing to answer a sexist question, terminating the interview, or reporting the situation to a supervisor), not one of the women who actually experienced the harassment did any of these things. Indeed, the behavioral forecasting literature makes clear that people are not very good at predicting their own behavior (Brinkman, et al., 2011; Diekmann et al., 2003; Epley & Dunning, 2000) despite holding these predictions with considerable certainty.

As research progressed, more sophisticated questions began to be asked and more theoretically-based explanatory systems proposed (Gruber & Bjorn, 1996; Knapp, et al., 1997), most of them generally based on Lazarus and Folkman's (1984; Folkman & Lazarus, 1988) classic model of stress and coping. Fitzgerald and her colleagues (Fitzgerald, Swan & Fisher, 1995) proposed a two-dimensional framework that incorporated both internal (emotion-focused) and external (problem-solving) responses, and emphasized the importance of the victim's primary appraisal of the situation as a critical determinant of her subsequent behavior. This internal/external dichotomy later received empirical support in four samples across three cultures (Wasti & Cortina, 2002). Researchers have also emphasized that coping is not a single action or event but an

ongoing process that unfolds over time and includes numerous different responses, depending on the options that are realistically available and what is at stake.

This notion of coping as a process, rather than an event, has become more explicit as the research has developed. Magley (2002) emphasized the importance of recognizing this multiplicity of responses: “The individual engaging in the coping tries something, waits to see whether it works, tries something else, and so on until she is satisfied with the situation. It is most certainly a dynamic process that unfolds over time (Magley, Buchanan, & Williams, 1996)” (Magley, 2002, p. 943).

Empirical support for this observation is demonstrated by the work of Cortina and Wasti (2005). Noting that “(S)ome harassed women use only avoidance and denial responses...others also solicit social support from friends and colleagues, and a small minority eventually confront their harassers and seek advocacy from organizational authorities (p. 183)”, these authors demonstrated different behavioral patterns of coping across women of various culture and class backgrounds. Their multi-level model identified three distinct patterns of coping (i.e., detached, avoidant negotiating, and support-seeking), each of which reflected relatively greater or lesser use of various combinations of behavior (see Knapp, Faley, Ekeberg, & DuBois, 1997, for an earlier description of similar categories).

Determinants and Outcomes of Response Strategies

Given that victims respond in multiple ways it is reasonable to ask what sorts of things influence these responses. Why does one woman report her harasser whereas another avoids him? Why does one victim avoid, appease, and (eventually) report her harasser, whereas another simply continues to avoid him?

There are few answers to these questions. Most models emphasize the role of cognitive appraisal as the primary determinant of what an individual will actually do (Settles, Harrell, Buchanan, & Yap, 2011; Wright & Fitzgerald, 2007; Kaiser & Miller, 2004), although it is mainly the decision to confront or report that has been empirically explored. Despite legal and organizational dictates to the contrary, it is by now relatively well accepted that such assertive responses are not only frequently ineffective, but often actually make things worse. For example, Hesson-McInnis and Fitzgerald (1997) found that assertive responding was associated with more negative outcomes of every type (including psychological and health-related) even after severity of harassment was controlled (see also Bergman, et al., 2002, and Stockdale, 1998).

Given this research, we believe it is past time to begin exploring not only the antecedents but, more practically, the effectiveness and consequences of alternative responses. Part of this will involve thinking carefully about what “effectiveness” actually means in this context, stopping the harassment being only the most obvious aspect. We are reminded once more of Perlin and Schooler’s (1978) cogent commentary:

“There are important human problems, such as those that we have seen in occupations, that are not responsive to individual coping responses. Coping with these may require interventions by collectivities rather than by individuals. Many of the problems stemming from arrangements deeply rooted in social and economic organizations may exert a powerful effect on personal life but be impervious to personal efforts to change them. . . Coping failures, therefore, do not necessarily reflect the shortcomings of individuals; in a real sense, they may represent the failure of social systems in which individuals are enmeshed. (p. 18, emphasis added).

Solutions and Interventions

So, what to do? Again, this is a question that can be addressed on many levels - individual, organizational, or societal. Virtually all commentators agree that societal – or at least social policy – change is the ultimate solution (e.g., changes in gender socialization, vigorous affirmative action programs); at the opposite end of the intervention continuum, some have devoted considerable thought to the possibility of individual training (Salisbury & Jaffe, 1996) or treatment (Pina, et al., 2009) for offenders. The former is obviously a long term proposition over which there is little direct control, whereas the latter, although certainly worthwhile, is incapable of addressing the scale of the problem and does nothing to prevent it. Perhaps not surprisingly, we emphasize the importance of organizational interventions, many of which are already at least partially understood from both a legal and an empirical perspective.

McDonald, et al. (2015) provide an innovative framework for organizational prevention and intervention, incorporating insights from a number of related perspectives generally not discussed together, including the sexual violence literature and workplace justice. They describe a two-dimensional model that organizes prevention strategies according to their organizational function (message, management, and monitoring) and timing (primary, secondary, and tertiary).

Primary prevention strategies focus on policy and training whereas secondary intervention involves an immediate response after the problem has occurred. Secondary strategies focus mainly on providing an effective organizational grievance procedure (e.g., multiple reporting channels, timely investigations, appropriate sanctions), whereas tertiary interventions involve longer-term restorative responses designed to deal with

lasting consequences including restoring health and safety, and preventing further perpetration and victimization (Chamberlain 2008).

Despite their importance, few tertiary strategies have been identified, an exception being long term follow-up of the complainant and accused to ascertain that no retaliation is occurring. We would add to this the provision of counseling/health care for the complainant and training for the respondent (if appropriate), as well as post-dispute workgroup resolution interventions (Remick, Salisbury, et al., 1996) designed to minimize the impact of the event on the more general workgroup.

The comprehensive and integrative nature of this framework is appealing, and its suggested strategies – combined with proactive and energetic support from top management – promise to “operationalize” an organizational climate that refuses to tolerate sexual harassment, and incorporates most if not all of the guidance from the EEOC concerning harassment prevention and intervention, as well as the (few) specific judicial guidelines on these issues (e.g., multiple complaint channels, policy distribution).

Future Directions, Unanswered Questions

Despite decades of reform, sexual harassment remains alive and well in the American workplace. Preceding sections of this chapter synthesized the scholarly record on sexual harassment, looking back over theoretical, empirical, and legal landscapes of years past. In contrast, we now look forward to the future with an eye to identifying promising new directions for this area of inquiry. Where are the gaps in the research record and how can they be rectified? What aspects of sexual harassment deserve more attention and why? It is to these topics that we now turn.

Assessing prevalence. It is frustrating to note that, 30 years after the Supreme Court recognized sexual harassment as a legal claim, there are still no “official” governmental estimates of its extent. Recognizing the difficulties of definition and measurement, we are still puzzled that no governmental department or agency has taken responsibility for providing benchmark national statistics. Whatever the imperfections of various methodologies, we badly need some reasonable standard against which to measure progress. The EEOC recently convened a Select Taskforce on the Study of Sexual Harassment in the Workplace (EEOC, 2016) and made a number of recommendations for prevalence studies, including collaborating with the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Census Bureau, and or private partners to produce the needed statistics. This is an issue whose time has come.

Taking gender harassment seriously. In male-dominated settings (e.g., the law, the military), nine out of every ten victims experience gender harassment with virtually no unwanted sexual overtures (Leskinen et al., 2011). In fact, the scarcer women are in any work setting, the more they face gender hostility and harassment (Kabat-Farr & Cortina, 2014). Gender harassment has nothing to do with sexually exploiting women or attempting to pull them into sexual situations; quite the contrary, it pushes them away. It appears to be a tool used “to police and discipline the gender outlaw: the woman who dares to do a man’s job is made to pay” (Franke, 1997, p. 764).

Notwithstanding their ubiquity, gender-harassing situations are often neglected by psychology, the media, and (even still) sometimes the law. This occurs even when the behavior fits all other characteristics of a legally actionable hostile environment: occurring “because of” the victim’s (female) sex; being sufficiently “severe or pervasive” to alter her

employment conditions for the worse; and creating a work environment that a “reasonable” person would find hostile, and that the victim herself evaluates as such. Though Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 says nothing about sexual behavior per se, conceptualizations that limit harassment largely to unwanted sexual pursuit emerged over time as the courts revised their interpretations of Title VII. In the beginning, women struggled to get unwanted sexual advances taken seriously as discrimination¹⁴; currently, it is more likely that courts will dismiss hostile environment cases unless they allege sexual misconduct, or “disaggregate” sexual from nonsexual conduct and then find the latter irrelevant to a hostile environment claim (e.g., Franke, 2004; Novak, 2012; Schultz, 2006). Apparently, sex as an “act” is now more legally potent than sex as a protected category. Thus, “the privileging of the sexual advance in sexual harassment law continues” (Leskinen et al., 2011, p. 27). Further research into gender harassment, undeniably the most widespread form of sexual harassment in work organizations, could help counteract this trend.

Having said this, we reiterate the importance of *not* judging women’s experiences against prevailing legal tests and then behaving as if experiences that don’t meet them don’t count. A woman forced to have sex against her will has been raped, whatever a jury may decide; similarly, a woman who has been told by a coworker to “Suck this, bitch” has been sexually harassed, whatever the law may say¹⁵. We are encouraged that the

¹⁴ *Corne v. Bausch & Lomb, Inc.*, 390 F. Supp. 161, 163 (D. Ariz. 1975), vacated sub nom. *Corne v. Bausch and Lomb, Inc.*, 562 F.2d 55 (9th Cir. 1977) (“there is nothing in the Act which could reasonably be construed to have it apply to ‘verbal and physical sexual advances’ by another employee”).

¹⁵ In this particular example, both the trial judge and the 7th Circuit Court of Appeals decided that she was not. *Galloway v. Gen. Motors Serv. Parts Operations*, 78 F.3d 1164 (7th Cir. 1996), abrogated on other grounds by *Nat’l R.R. Passenger Corp. v. Morgan*, 536 U.S. 101 (2002).

recent EEOC Taskforce (2016) did not confine itself to the legal definition of workplace harassment, but rather noted the importance of conduct and behaviors that may not be “legally actionable”. It is important that we understand all varieties of workplace sexual harassment, even those assumed to be inconsequential or “perfectly legal.” Seemingly small or “joking” behaviors, like sexist name-calling and teasing, can become just as oppressive and damaging as sexual coercion when they occur on a daily basis for months on end. The field in general would benefit from more research at this allegedly “subtler” end of the sexual harassment continuum.

Attending to intersections of social location. Given our fundamentally woman-centered approach to understanding sexual harassment, it may seem contradictory for us to argue for an intersectional perspective as a needed emphasis in harassment research. We believe it is not. Although women are the focus of, and lens through which we view, this problem, the question of what woman, in what situation, by what individual, involving what type of behavior is ignored at great risk.

Harassment research, legislation, and case law have traditionally focused on one social axis at a time. An important future direction is to understand harassment based on multiple dimensions of difference. Theories of *intersectionality* and *double-jeopardy* can guide this work. Intersectional perspectives tell us that we all concurrently inhabit multiple social locations (based on gender, race, class, etc.), which vary in the degree of privilege and power they afford (e.g., Cole, 2009; see also Crenshaw, 1991). Relatedly, theories of *double-jeopardy* argue that individuals who occupy multiple categories of disadvantage – such as women of color – face a “double whammy of discrimination” rooted in both

gender and ethnic prejudices (Berdahl & Moore, 2006, p. 427; see also Beal, 1970). These perspectives complicate our understanding of harassment in the workplace.

To illustrate, consider the intersection of gender and sexuality. Researchers who investigate “sexual orientation harassment” typically focus on conduct that explicitly references sexuality (e.g., disparagement of lesbians), as experienced by sexual minority employees; gender receives little if any attention. Although lesbians are, by definition, female, for purposes of research their “woman-ness” is generally subsumed by their sexual identity and thus disappears from view (and understanding).

Similarly, sexual harassment researchers generally ignore the role of sexual orientation, ignoring that harassment based on gender, sex, and sexuality are closely connected, comprising components of a larger “technology of sexism” (Franke, 1997, p. 696) and pressuring all persons to conform to narrow, rigid, hetero-gender ideals (Rabelo & Cortina, 2014). More concretely, women and men who flout traditional gender norms are at heightened risk for sexual orientation harassment (aka “heterosexist harassment;” Rabelo & Cortina, 2014), regardless of their actual sexual orientation (Konik & Cortina, 2008). As Gloria Steinem (1978, p. 267) famously argued, “...sooner or later, all nonconforming women are likely to be labeled lesbians. True, we start out with the smaller punishments of being called ‘pushy’ or ‘aggressive,’ ‘man-hating’ or ‘unfeminine.’ But it’s only a small step from those adjectives...to the full-fledged epithet of ‘lesbian.’” In sum, it is virtually impossible to disentangle gender-based and sexuality-based harassment on the job; where there is one, you will typically find the other (Konik & Cortina, 2008; Rabelo & Cortina, 2014). It is time that research and the law caught up with this reality.

Other intersectional studies of harassment have addressed the interplay of gender and race. In research within Canadian organizations, Berdahl and Moore (2006) found women employees reporting more sex-based harassment than men, and employees of color reported more race-based harassment than their white counterparts; the net result was that women of color described more harassment at work than white women, white men, or men of color. In a similar vein, Buchanan, Settles, and Woods (2008) found black and white female military personnel facing different types of sexual harassment, with white women encountering more gender harassment (conduct that insults and rejects women), and black women reporting more unwanted sexual attention and coercion. So-called sexual harassment, it appears, has much to do with race (as well as class and other markers of status). These intersectional understandings of workplace harassment are, by definition, messy and complicated. At the same time, they mirror reality, and are vital for moving the field forward.

Examining intersections of behavior and experience. Social location is not the only venue of intersection. Just as various types of harassment tend to occur together, so too does harassment itself link to other forms of violence against women, an intersection often overlooked even by sexual violence researchers themselves. Violence against women takes many forms, from sexual harassment to sexual assault to stalking to murder; these abuses merge at their edges and in the world, sharing common roots in misogyny as well as sociocultural constructions of gender and power. Each of them can and do follow women into the workplace, creating not only hostile but dangerous work environments; the way we conceptualize and label these experiences, however, tends to presume hard “edges”, artificial boundaries that obscure similarities by allocating each to

its own social, political, and intellectual ghetto. If a supervisor rapes a female waitress in a restaurant meat-locker during the night shift, is it sexual assault or sexual harassment? If he threatens her with a knife to force her cooperation does the incident become assault with a deadly weapon? If she happens to be his girlfriend (whom he regularly batters and stalks through the use of workplace technology, is this harassment or intimate partner violence? The only possible answer to these questions is “Yes”. Thus do the realities of women’s experiences defy the neat categories by which we would contain them.

Such artificial categories increase the temptation to perceive a continuum of severity among these acts, rather than within them. Insults and name-calling may be vulgar or offensive, but are commonly thought to be essentially “harmless”, not violence, not even harassment, but merely an unfortunate violation of workplace “civility codes.” Verbal sexual advances are thought to be “less serious” than physical ones, although the female factory worker who is ordered “On your knees, bitch” might disagree. Hugging, fondling, and even grabbing are often considered “no big deal”, particularly if the parties are known to each other and thought to be friendly. After all, if there was no penetration, it was “no big deal”. Like the ubiquitous myths¹⁶ that attach to all forms of violence against women, such trivializing constructions function to deny, minimize and justify the pervasive misogyny that pervades our culture.

We strongly encourage more collaboration among researchers of the different forms of violence and discrimination against women, partnerships specifically designed to include conduct based on gender/sex, sexuality, race, and other dimensions of

¹⁶ An exposition of the essential similarity of myths concerning various forms of violence against women and the ways in which they function to deny and justify sexual violence was recently begun by Lonsway, Cortina & Magley (2008). This discussion is overdue and we regret that space precludes us from contributing to it here.

difference. Such collaboration, both intellectual and political, should encompass behaviors both verbal and physical, “come-ons” and “put-downs,” civil offenses and criminal charges. Those of us who study gender and violence have long tended to specialize in particular domains (e.g., there are “rape researchers,” “harassment researchers,” “IPV specialists,” etc.); although this has yielded detailed understandings of each “variety” of abuse, it has also tended to obscure commonalities, overlaps, root causes, and the like. An important next step for the science of gendered violence is to come out of our intellectual “silos” and join forces.

Confronting retaliation and the forces of silence. We have emphasized that sexual harassment victims most often suffer in silence, rarely reporting their abuse to anyone in authority (e.g., Bergman et al., 2002; Cortina & Magley, 2003). Numerous factors interact to produce this situation, the most critical being fear of *retaliation*; and, it is the case that retaliation transpires at alarmingly high rates – not only *after* employees complain about harassment but also *before*, sometimes as a means of deterring them from doing so (Cortina & Magley, 2003). Such retaliation takes multiple forms: it can be *professional*, involving adverse work-related actions that are tangible, formal, and documented in employment records (e.g., failure to promote, undesirable reassignment); more often, though, retaliation is *social*, involving coworker ostracism, blame, unkind gossip, or treatment as a “trouble-maker.” Social retaliation can come from individuals at any level of the organization—peers, superiors, and subordinates. Research shows that social retaliation occurs at roughly twice the rate of professional retaliation, and carries equivalent professional and psychological harms (Cortina & Magley, 2003). What are the antecedents of such retaliation, and what interventions are effective at interrupting it?

How can employers better protect women who lodge complaints, and will this remove some of the fear surrounding reporting? More broadly, how can we disrupt social and professional forces encouraging silence and shame among sexual harassment victims? These questions await future research.

Reflecting on this issue, we admit again to some frustration. It has become somewhat of a ritual, following yet one more analysis documenting that less than 10% of victims report, to call for more enlightened organizational policies and procedures, knowing full well that the next study will show more or less the same thing. In some ways, “reporting” has become the supposed panacea for harassed women in the same way that “training” has for organizations; yet study after study tells us that victims don’t report, and current methods of training have little if any impact on changing anyone’s actual behavior. We have struggled with this situation for more than 20 years and have come to believe we must begin to listen to what the data are trying to tell us.

What would that mean? To begin, it perhaps means accepting that women don’t report and that this is a rational decision, given what so often happens to those who do. What comes next is not immediately obvious, although alternatives are beginning to be discussed (EEOC, 2016). For example, *bystander interventions* - similar to those currently explored as remedies for campus sexual assault – may prove promising in at least some types of workplace situations and serve at the least to redistribute some of the responsibility currently placed on victims to “handle” the problem themselves. Similarly, workplace *civility training* (that is, a focus on promoting respect in the workplace more generally, as opposed to eliminating sex-based and sexually offensive behavior) may likewise offer solutions. The common theme of such approaches is that they dilute the

historical focus on the victim and her behavior and response, a reframing that is long overdue.

Conclusion

“Thirty years after the U.S. Supreme Court held ... that workplace harassment was an actionable form of discrimination prohibited by Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, we conclude that we have come a far way... but sadly and too often still have far to go” (EEOC, 2016). We agree. In this chapter, we have tried to capture the essence of that journey, as well as identify some of the obstacles and landmarks that mark the way. It is our hope that our chapter will encourage others to explore further, helping to ensure that subsequent generations of women may travel their own paths without the burdens we have described here.

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