Organized for Harassment? Sexual Harassment Risk Factors and Organizational Configuration

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Abstract

Nearly half of all women in corporate America will experience sexual harassment at work at some point during their career, and yet limited progress has been made to mitigate these occurrences. Gender inequalities are regarded as the key factors that lead to sexual harassment in the workplace. This study adds to this area of research by considering how elements of organizational configuration -- an organization's cultural values, office layout, human resources' practices, and organizational structure -- contribute to the occurrence of sexual harassment. The study leverages a mixed method design in surveying 164 participants with a variety of quantitative and qualitative questions that provide an understanding of their workplace configuration and experiences with sexual harassment. The prevention factors for sexual harassment shown by the quantitative data are employees' emotional and physical safety, an organization's sexual harassment policies, positive organizational responses to reports of harassment, gender equality, and access to privacy at work. The risk factors are gender inequality, excessive social stimulation, and reporting relationships with high power differentials between managers and their subordinates. These findings are further explained and supported by the qualitative data, which provides insights into what elements of organizational configuration can be altered in order to reduce the risk of sexual harassment.

Research Questions

1. How do sexual harassment incidents rates vary across organizational configurations?
2. Can the findings of this study identify ways for organizations to safeguard themselves against sexual harassment risk factors by altering organizational configuration?

Background

- Previous literature focuses on gender inequality, such as having a male dominated work environment as the central risk factor for harassment [1]
- Organizational layout has been predicted to impact employee relationships, but its relationship to sexual harassment has not been sufficiently studied [2]
- Leaders attitudes towards sexual harassment and sexists behaviors, are visible elements of organizational culture that can create or limit risk of harassment [1]
- Highly structured organizations with large power differentials have been shown to create risk [3]
- High gender skews of men to women increases risk [1]

Methods

- Mixed methods one time online survey asked a variety of quantitative and qualitative questions about participants organizational configuration's and their experiences with sexual harassment
- Recruitment through the researcher's personal networks, snowball sampling, and Mturk

Eligibility
- Female identified adult, currently or previously employed by a US private sector business for 3 months or more, can read and write English

Question Types + Analysis
- Quantitative survey questions used a 5-point Likert scale to identify participants agreement with various statements about their organization
- SPSS was used to analyze quantitative data
- Qualitative questions asked participants to elaborate what their organization could do to reduce the risk of SH and what elements of their organization increased risk of SH
- Thematic analysis of qualitative data was conducted using data driven codes

Participants and Measures

- Recruited 164 participants with a range of years of work experience, job titles and racial identifications
- 3 sexual harassment outcome measures were developed
  - Any Harassment Experienced, Harassing comments, and non-consensual incidents
- 10 organizational measures were developed through averaging highly correlated questions about describing participants' organizational configurations
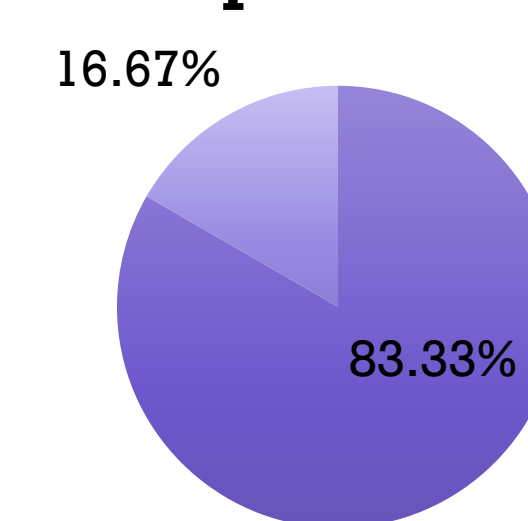
Frequency of Harassment

- 40.24% of the 164 participants in experienced sexual harassment
- 83.333% of the harassment experienced was verbal harassment, 16.67% of harassment was non-consensual
- 'low level' types of harassment are occurring at greater frequencies

Experiences with Sexual Harassment
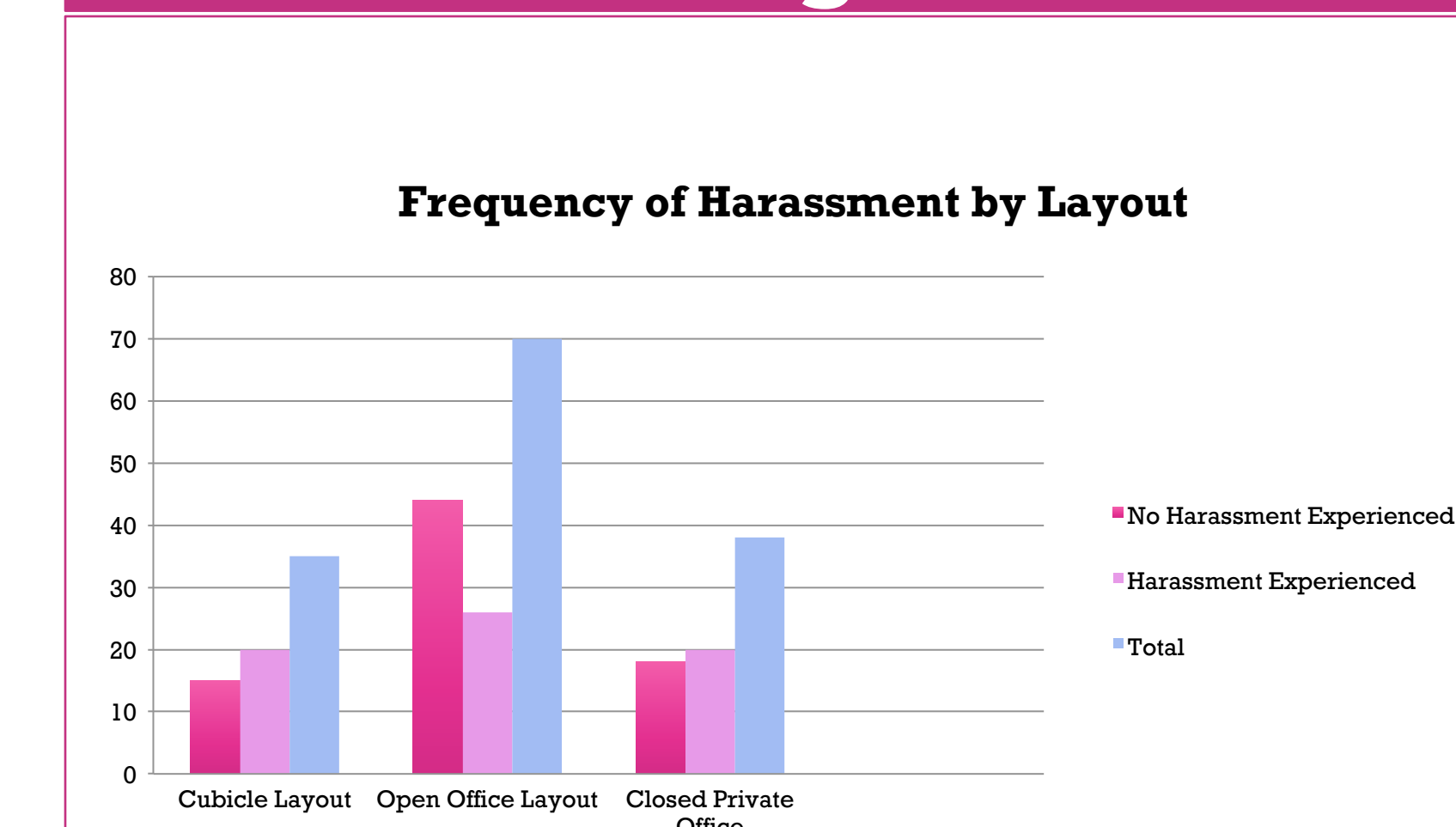
40.24% / 59.76%
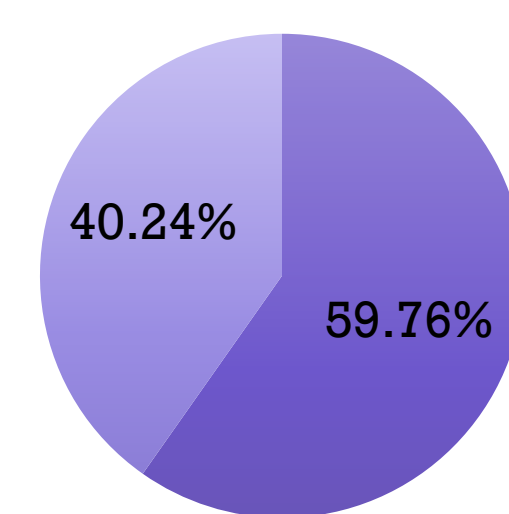
Types of Harassment Experienced

16.67% / 83.33%

Results

Variable	Any Harassment Experienced	Harassing Comments	Non-consensual Incidents
Safety	-	-	
Privacy		-	
Social stimulation	+		
Sexual harassment policies	-	-	-
Positive response to reporting	-	-	
Gender equality	-	-	
Inequality	+	+	+
Power differentials in reporting relationships	+	+	+

"+" indicates a significantly positive correlation "-" indicates a significantly negative correlations between organizational variable and sexual harassment outcome

Organizational Layout

Frequency of Harassment by Layout

Cubicle Layout, Open Office Layout, Closed Private Office — No Harassment Experienced, Harassment Experienced, Total

Participants working in open office layouts were found to be the most likely to experience harassment. The probabilities for experiencing harassment is 5713%, 52.62%, and 37.14% for open layout, cubicles and closed private offices respectively

Conclusion

Considering the findings of this study, the organization with the lowest risk of harassment would be one which has strong and clear sexual harassment policies, responds positively to reports of harassment, promotes gender equality, provides privacy when needed, monitors social stimulation, and has reporting relationships with minimal power differentials.

Acknowledgements

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