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What is sexual harassment and how prevalent is it?

Half of all working women in America will be harassed in the workplace. But the attitudes of younger men may change that

**The Economist explains**

Nov 24th 2017 | by J.M.F.

IN RECENT months myriad women have detailed the sexual harassment and assault they have experienced in the workplace. Hollywood, Silicon Valley, politics, the media, the armed forces, academia; few of America's institutions have avoided scandal. Sexual assault, according to the Department of Justice, is "any type of sexual contact or behaviour that occurs without the explicit consent of the

recipient”. Sexual harassment, which by some definitions includes sexual assault, is rather harder to specify.

Despite its apparent ubiquity, sexual harassment is a relatively new term. It entered common parlance in the late 1970s, particularly after the publication of “Sexual Shakedown: The Sexual Harassment of Women on the Job” by Lin Farley in 1978. The book was published at a time when the number of working women was rising sharply. America’s Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) first gave a legal definition for sexual harassment in 1980. It said that unwelcome sexual advances or sexualised conduct that affected an individual’s work were grounds for complaint. After the Supreme Court ruled in 1986 that companies were liable for harassment even if they were not themselves aware of it, the number of cases swelled. Each year the EEOC receives about 12,000 complaints of sexual harassment, a figure certain to be a gross undercount. Despite its legal import and the often debilitating effects it can have on victims, no national statistics measure the prevalence of sexual harassment in America—either in the workplace or farther afield. Men may suffer sexual harassment as well, though much more rarely (and the culprits are often other men).

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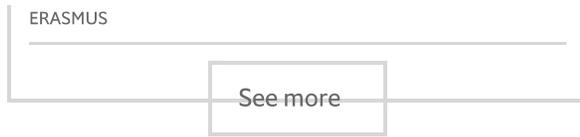
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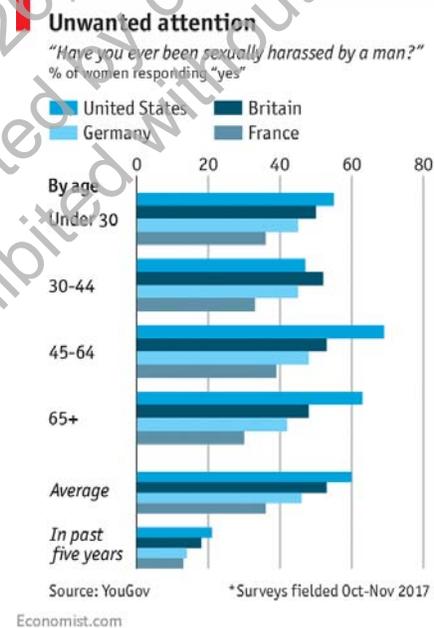
In an attempt to measure such harassment, one sociologist, Louise Fitzgerald of the University of Illinois, has divided it into three broad categories. First is gender harassment, which encompasses general sexist behaviour and remarks. This can include sexist hostility (misogynistic



jokes), sexual hostility (degrading women with language and behaviour) or gender policing (punishing women for not

conforming to stereotypical femininity). Gender harassment is by far the most prevalent form of sexual harassment: perhaps 15-20% of women in America experience it in any given year. Unwanted sexual attention, the second most prevalent form of harassment, includes the making of sexual advances that are unwelcome and unreciprocated. About 10% of women are believed to experience such conduct each year. Finally, sexual coercion combines unwanted sexual attention with job-related pressures, such as bribes or threats, in an attempt to force acquiescence. In America, perhaps 2-4% of women encounter such behaviour in any given year.

Sociologists broadly agree that about half of American women are sexually harassed at least once during their working lives. That is backed up by a recent survey from YouGov. It polled women in Britain, France, Germany and America, and found 50% had experienced sexual harassment, either inside or outside the workplace. Seventeen percent said the harassment had taken place in the previous five years. There was little variation in experiences of harassment by age group, which suggests that sexual harassment is nothing new. The age of the harassers is not known. Given the central role that power often plays in such abuse, many of them are probably much older than their victims. But matters may be improving. The survey also found that the views of younger men about what behaviour is appropriate were closer to women's views than were those of older men.



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