Summary- Sexual Harassment in Academia: An International Research Review

Background: In 2015, the #MeToo movement against sexual harassment began in the USA, and by 2017 became an international phenomenon. In Sweden, this led to many similar movements in various industries, including academia. The #Akademiuppropet movement gathered around 2,500 signatures from persons in academia. This brought to the attention of the Swedish Research Council that in Sweden there was no up-to-date picture of the research that exists into sexual harassment in academia. The Council therefore commissioned an extensive review of what is known about sexual harassment in academia in general, and specifically in Sweden and the Nordic region. This report is the result of that project.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The international #MeToo movement of autumn 2017 has had a major impact in Sweden. It prompted local campaigns, including a campaign specific to sexual harassment in academia. #Akademiuppropet, a manifesto signed by 2,648 students, doctoral students, employees and others involved, resulted in several new measures within the higher education sector. It led most Swedish Higher Education Institutions to intensify their work to prevent sexual harassment. The Swedish Government also mandated that higher education institutes should highlight and make visible their preventive work to counteract sexual harassment.

As part of the national effort, The Swedish Research Council commissioned a research review on sexual harassment in academia. After an initial search, it became clear that both Swedish and Nordic research into sexual harassment in academia is limited, poorly anchored in a larger international research field, and that prevalence studies of satisfactory scientific quality are lacking in Sweden after 2009. This resulted in a specific assignment format, with four different yet linked parts:

1. Meta-analysis of existing research reviews of sexual harassment in working life as a whole, and, if relevant, limited to just academic organizations
2. Meta-analysis of a selection of top-ranked, peer-reviewed research articles on sexual harassment in academia

3. Meta-analysis of Swedish research into sexual harassment in academia,

4. Thematic in-depth study

The literature review search covered over 50 years, and a total of 5,561 unique items of literature. Ultimately, 187 items were included in the review.

**Background on Sexual harassment in academia:**

Global studies show that one in every three women is exposed to physical or sexual violence. High levels of infant and mother mortality, lack of education for girls and women, limited opportunities for financial independence for women, and a number of serious ill health aspects enable, and increase the negative consequences of violence against women. In the EU member states, between 45 and 55 percent of women (corresponding to around 100 million women) have experienced exposure to sexual harassment during their working lives. Nine out of ten of the world’s countries have laws against sexual harassment in working life today, but almost six out of ten lack adequate laws against sexual harassment in higher education and schools.

Women’s bodily vulnerability also relates directly to other forms of gender inequality. In the international research field on sexual harassment though, links to other types of violence are clarified in a relatively limited proportion of studies. Instead, a greater focus is placed more specifically on the legal, organizational, psychological and ethnological aspects of exposure. Since the 1980’s prevalence studies have in various ways been dominant in the global research field.

In Sweden, around 8 to 26 percent of women report exposure to workplace sexual harassment in studies carried out over the last twenty-year period, for men this is between 2 to 6 percent. In Sweden, exposure to sexual harassment in working life is well documented at an overall level, but in-depth studies are lacking on issues such as prevalence in various sectors, causes of different forms of exposure, consequences
for individuals and the work environment, etc. Within the higher education sector, knowledge is even poorer. Swedish activity and legislation mapping and combatting sexual harassment in the workplace and in academia has been developing since the 1980’s. That said, research on the issue stagnated in the last decade. The #MeToo movement revived the effort.

Chapter 2: Research reviews on sexual harassment in academia and working life at large

122 articles were located. Of those, 29 were selected for inclusion in the chapter based on title, abstract and subject words. After further review, 19 were categorized as reference material for the chapter, and 10 were chosen to be highlighted in the chapter (see pp. 19-22 of the report for the full list). The criteria for inclusion in the chapter were focus on academic organizations, sexual harassment and / or a wider understanding of the concept that may include harassment, bullying and sexualized violence, and cover a significant part of a research field.

State of knowledge:

The literature defines sexual harassment through two different approaches. The first approach sees sexual harassment as a “psychological construct”. It is an unwanted sex-related behavior that is experienced by the person exposed as offensive or threatening against their wellbeing. The second approach uses legal definitions and is thus context based. In most definitions sexual harassment is understood to include verbal, non-verbal and physical actions or behaviors that are unwelcome by the person exposed. These behaviors are characterized by a sexual nature, and places the person exposed in a hostile and / or threatening situation. The behaviors defined as sexual harassment are heterogenous and exist on continuum that range from hostile sexual advances, to sexist jokes. Some studies ask survey participants to define sexual harassment. Studies with this focus have shown that women tend to understand more actions and behaviors as sexual harassment than men do, and that women have lower acceptance of these behaviors than men do.
Sexual harassment in academia exists at all levels and within all disciplines. It is the most common form of harassment in academia. That said, different prevalence studies have used different sampling methodologies, sample sizes, sector focus, etc. and therefore had gotten dramatically different results. For example, in a survey or European studies, figures for women who have been exposed to sexual harassment range from 17%-81%. Similar US studies range from 40%-75%. These inconsistent results make it difficult to make any statement about prevalence, and whether sexual harassment is increasing or decreasing over time. Underreporting is also a significant confounder in assessing prevalence.

Must studies on sexual harassment in academia have focused on the student population. Very few studies account for intersectionality.

Consequences of sexual harassment:

Sexual harassment has several different psychological, health-related and job-related consequences on the individual. Psychological consequences include irritation and anger, anxiety, feelings of powerlessness and degradation, depression and post-traumatic stress syndrome. Job-related consequences include absence, decreased job satisfaction, engagement and productivity, decreased self-confidence and self-image, and persons giving notice from their jobs. Even observing or hearing about a colleague’s exposure to sexual harassment can generate “bystander stress” and cause conflicts in the work team. There are also direct costs to the organization, as sexual harassment results in high personnel turnover, and possible legal costs if incidences are reported to the police. More indirect costs for organizations are consequences such as reduced workplace morale and job motivation among employees, and “poor reputation” for the workplace

Explanation models of sexual harassment:

There are several models to explain the phenomenon of sexual harassment.

1. Biological model- based on concepts of natural, biological differences between men and women as the explanation for the occurrence of sexual harassment.
2. Socio-cultural model- sexual harassment is understood as a manifestation of unequal power distribution between women and men

3. Legal consciousness model- focus is on investigating how and when actions are perceived as sexual harassment and what leads to formal accusations

4. Organizational models- explain and understand sexual harassment in relation to specific organizational / workplace contexts.

5. Power models- Unequal power relationships are identified. In these models gender emerges as a clearly contributory factor to exposure to harassment in academia. This also impacts which groups are exposed. Different structures in academia create and maintain unequal power relationships between women and men, for example through differing reward and punishment structures. Sexual harassment is more common in workplaces that are dominated by men, and in particular in such workplaces characterized by a sexualized and masculinized work environment, where femininity is undervalued. Sexual harassment is more frequent in workplaces with great power imbalance between different levels of the organization. This is also something that is assumed to explain the increased exposure that women with insecure tenure report, as this situation places the person at a further power disadvantage compared to their colleagues.

Expressed non-acceptance of certain behaviors, policies and clarity from the management of what is expected of employees is highlighted as central for an organization that wishes to counteract sexual harassment. In a corresponding way, certain workplace cultures and certain types of leadership and organization facilitate sexual harassment. For example, two type of leadership style are associated with the occurrence of harassment: authoritarian and “laissez faire”. Marginalized groups, in particular HBTQ persons, ethnic minorities, persons with functional disabilities, persons with previous experience of sexual violence and women with insecure employment, are highlighted as groups at increased risk of being exposed to sexual harassment.

Research focusing on perpetrators, that is persons who are exposing others to sexual harassment, is lacking in the material analyzed. Around 85 percent of all those who report sexual harassment are women, 15 percent are men, and in both cases the perpetrator is usually a man.
Preventive measures against sexual harassment

Studies have shown that well-established organization culture aimed at displaying intolerance against sexual harassment is important to combating it.

Organizational measures should focus on creating a respectful and welcoming work environment that does not undervalue employees due to their gender. At the same time, empirical research showing that policies are effective in preventing and reducing the prevalence of sexual harassment are insufficient and their efficacy also depends on how the policy is structured.

Recommended measures to prevent sexual harassment:

1. Primary prevention- Organizations should have implemented policies and processes that are well-established throughout the organization. Personnel should be educated on what sexual harassment entails. Management should make it clear that sexual harassment is not accepted.

2. Secondary prevention- The process of reporting sexual harassment should be managed for example by employing external, trained advisers. This is considered extra important in cases where an employee is harassed by a superior, such as a manager or supervisor.

3. Tertiary prevention- A person exposed to sexual harassment should receive help, support, rehabilitation and follow-up.

It is not clear though the extent of the efficacy of any given measure. That said, a recurring theme in the research is that a central way of preventing sexual harassment is through education and training. Training should be provided to all populations and through a variety of media. Programs implemented should be research based. They should relate to the different types of harassment and the different types of groups within the organization. A more detailed understanding of the specific needs that exist at a university needs to be the starting point for interventions and preventive work. Higher education institutions that are successfully implementing preventive work against sexual violence / harassment should be noticed.
Future research on the topic should account for intersectionality and should study countries beyond the US. Long term quantitative and qualitative studies should be promoted. Empirical studies of sexual harassment should be combined with research that investigates other destructive behaviors in a workplace, particularly bullying, racism and gender discrimination. Investigations should be made into what combination of policies, education and reporting procedures leads to reduced incidence of sexual harassment.

Chapter 3: a selection of top ranked, peer-reviewed research articles on sexual harassment in academia

This chapter summarizes and analyzes concept use, results and recommendations of the scientific studies that have made the greatest global impact. All featured articles focus mainly on sexual harassment and focus on academia solely or in a comparative perspective. In total, 30 peer reviewed articles were included.

Articles can be divided into a few types:

1. Prevalence, multi-disciplinary
2. Prevalence, healthcare and medicine
3. Prevalence, bystander
4. Prevalence, other
5. Other studies

Summary of study results and recommendations:

Practice

- Evidence shows bystander education programs to be effective in reducing sexual harassment and other forms of gender-based exposure. Findings justify the development of these programs in higher education systems.
• It is important to develop inclusive work and study environments to prevent the long-term ad organization wide effects of sexual harassment.
• There is a particular need for knowledge about physical and verbal violence in healthcare and medical programs, and for the integration of preventative programs.
• Concrete preventive interventions during various forms of fieldwork are strongly justified.

Policy

• There should be regular surveys of prevalence of sexual harassment and other forms of gender-based violence.
• Special attention should be given to non-heterosexual students and employees, and their rights should be enforced. Special consideration should be given to their unique risk factors and needs, which place unique needs on support structures.
• On-line harassment should be addressed with emphasis on security-creating mechanisms in educational environments, as well as review of policies aimed at more clearly identifying and covering online exposure
• Policy must consider intersectionality

Research and analysis

• There is a need for more theory-driven studies of sexual harassment that are unrelated to a given national framework. Theory development needs to catch up with existing empirical studies. In existing empirical studies, there is also a need for more multi-disciplinary studies that address gender-based harassment in correlation with other variables, factors and contexts.
• Evaluation of “bystander programs” require more research-based methods, clearer concept definitions and stronger links to existing theories of sexualized violence, victim-creation, promotion strategies and other similar phenomena.
• More in-depth, subject specific studies are needed to see the effects of sexual harassment on women’s career paths.
• There is great need for studies of on-line harassment, especially studies that account for outcomes of education programs, effects of consumption and dissemination of pornography in study environments, the experiences of non-heterosexual students, etc. Methods of measuring and preventing on-line harassment are still in early stages.

• The studies agree that existing policies to prevent sexual harassment are insufficient. Long-term, systematic organizational change is needed.

• There has been little development in the literature over time. Prevalence studies form the vast majority of research on sexual harassment. There has been change over time in the theoretical approach to, and definition of, sexual harassment.

• There is evidence-based research exploring how sexual harassment impacts individuals in terms of:
  o Job performance
  o Self-esteem, anxiety and depression
  o Increase in risk behaviors, particularly substance abuse
  o Post-traumatic stress disorder

• The gap between the legal and the theoretical definitions of sexual harassment are closing over time

**Chapter 4: Swedish Research on sexual harassment in academia**

*About the material:* All studies focused on academia and sexual harassment and/or other types of harassment, bullying and sexualized violence. A total of 30 studies were included in the analysis; 18 were quantitative mapping and 2 were qualitative studies.

*State of knowledge:* Studies are limited in terms of sample size, population, restriction to one institution, or limited in their time aspect. Studies were conducted between 1989-2010. It seemed that the topic was often met with hostility and defensiveness. The methodological issues relevant in the international studies were also relevant to the Swedish studies.
Results showed that sexual harassment, and other forms of harassment and bullying, exist in Swedish academia. Both men and women experience them, but women experience at a higher rate, around 15%. Sexual harassment exposure rates are 4%-26% for women, and 2%-6% for men. It occurs at the student, doctoral and employee level. Most those exposed are women, and most perpetrators are men.

*Concepts, definitions and language:* Many different concepts and terms are used throughout the studies. The terms also relate to different behaviors. In qualitative studies, there was also often a mismatch between the legal term for sexual harassment, and the problematic experiences described by interviewees. In some studies, the term “sexual harassment” was abandoned in favor of more inclusive terms such as “gender-offensive processes”. Some studies perceived the term “sexual harassment” as disengaged from its meaning.

*Why does sexual harassment occur?* Sexual harassment relates to gender structuring in academia. Exposure to sexual harassment is dismissed or minimized as a problem. It is treated as commonplace and normal.

*Recommendations:*
- There should be training and education courses that cover what sexual harassment is, what a person exposed to it can do, and student rights.
- There should be increased support for those exposed to sexual harassment.
- There must be clear zero-tolerance policies on sexual harassment.
- Steps should be taken to increase gender equality in academia through recruitment, promoting women to leadership positions, etc.
- Institutional leadership must lead the effort against sexual harassment.
- More research should be undertaken that fills the current voids.

*Chapter 5: Nordic Research on sexual harassment in academia*
About the material: All studies focused on academia and sexual harassment and/or other types of harassment, bullying and sexualized violence. A total of 18 studies were included in the analysis.

Summary: Most studies are prevalence studies. Studies have found that sexual harassment ranges from 3%-34% depending on population. This is slightly lower than in the international studies. The material also includes qualitative studies, focusing on conditions in academia relating to gender and gender discrimination. These studies find that gender is hidden in academic structures and cultures. It negatively impacts the academic life of women. They also ask how despite a high level of gender equality in general (compared to other countries), structures are still reproduced that counteract gender equality in academia.

Within the Nordic literature, Finland leads in studies. That said, there is a lack of literature, and a lack of peer-reviewed literature. There are still many holes to fill in in the Nordic understanding of sexual harassment in academia.

Chapter 6: Prevalence and thematic analysis: the state of knowledge and methodological challenges of research on prevalence of sexual harassment.

This chapter goes into more detail about themes that arise from the prevalence studies, as well as the limitations of these studies.

What does research know? The state of knowledge is compromised by the very different scopes and scientific qualities of the different studies. Studies show that sexual harassment ranges from 15%-20%. Other forms of gendered violence have much higher rates, as much as 50%. Women are mostly the victims of sexual harassment, while the perpetrators are predominantly men. Different populations among students and staff have different rates of harassment.

Definition and knowledge claims: Definitions affect the measurement of prevalence. In order to have comparable studies there must be a uniform definition. Underreporting
is also a problem that characterizes many of the studies. Underreporting affects both prevalence measures, but also policy formulation and problem-solving ability.

The Double Nature of Underreporting: Most sexual harassment goes unreported. This means that managers are not aware of the extent or forms of sexual harassment in their organizations and cannot address them properly. Rather than report, those exposed to harassment find alternative ways to cope including talking with friends and family, avoiding the perpetrator, switching work environments or leaving the field.

Research has exposed the many reasons people do not report sexual harassment. Just a few reasons include fear of negative consequences for career opportunities, pay or grades, unwillingness to see oneself as a victim, or fear of how others will react. Some studies have found that fears are not unfounded. Reporting rarely improves and might even worsen a person’s situation. Thus, in order to deal with underreporting, organizations must understand why people are hesitant to report, and deal with that problem.

Method as problem: Methodological challenges are discussed relatively often in a most of the prevalence studies included in the research field. The primary challenges involved are definitions, selection issues, knowledge claims of quantitative or qualitative methods, and the time period and context of the study. There is also a distinct lack of consideration for intersectionality.

Diversified exposure: Investigations of prevalence tend to be delimited in time and space. While this provides knowledge about the risks of individual locations, experiences of exposure also impact across existing time and space. Throughout all the individual studies in the research field, prevalence is reduced unconsciously, often to a delimited place and experience, and is not seen as a web of spatial, interlinked experiences of exposure.

What does research need to know? Overall, the research-based knowledge about prevalence is poor in several ways. This applies perhaps primarily to in-depth knowledge about perpetrators, long-term effects on individuals, work environments and organizations, and the impact on qualification, career paths, scientific quality and
academic organization culture, etc. There is also a lack of studies with a clear theoretic concept understanding and developed comparative approaches. Another shortcoming is that empirical research into prevalence rarely contributes more than marginally to the necessary method development aimed, for example, at solving the problems linked with underreporting. There is also a need to change the perspective, and to ask research questions that investigate how violence is exercised and enabled in academic organizations.

Chapter 7: Concluding Discussion

This chapter provides a brief summary of what was discussed in previous chapters.