# Sexual Harassment of Women Leaders

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Picture an incident of sexual harassment. For many, this prompt brings up the image of the boss of a firm harassing his secretary. Pioneering research on sexual harassment in the 1970s was focused on exactly this type of scenario.[1] Women were harassed at the job while doing "womanly" things like cleaning up the office or assisting with meetings: essentially a wife's tasks, but in the workplace.[2] The power component was also clear. Men with power harassed women without power.

Much has changed since the 1970s. Women are no longer relegated to the lowliest positions in the corporate hierarchy. Nor are they restricted to administrative roles, but have moved into positions of leadership. A "silent revolution" has shaken the labor market, with large increases in women's labor force participation and many women starting to see career ambition as part of their identity.[3] More women have been advancing to positions of organizational leadership, reducing the power gap with men in the workplace.

Recent research has highlighted how women's advancement may involve a "paradox of power": rather than reducing exposure to sexual harassment, power in the workplace seems to put women at greater risk. In a pathbreaking study of three hundred U.S. women in their thirties, sociologists Heather McLaughlin, Christopher Uggen, and Amy Blackstone found higher rates of harassment



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among women who had reached supervisory positions at this stage of their career.[4]

Our research in the United States, Japan, and Sweden lends support to the par-

and women with management positions for a total final sample size of 1,261. We added a survey question to check the attentiveness of respondents, which was answered correctly by 848 persons. In what follows, we use the full sample. A description of the age, education, income, and marital status of the respondents can also be found in the Web Appendix for all three countries (Table W1) and for attentive and nonattentive respondents of Japan and the United States (Table W2) (accessible at https://www.amacad.org/daedalus/harassment_of_women_leaders).

We surveyed employed women Japanese citizens in early 2019. The sample was drawn by the Japanese survey firm Nikkei Research from their opt-in online panel and with an oversampling of women supervisors. The survey reached 1,573 respondents, whereof 720 were attentive. We also conducted a semistructured interview with six employees (four women and two men) at a Japanese firm in March 2019 to gain better understandings of the mechanisms of sexual harassment.

The Swedish Work Environment Survey contains three questions on respondents' experiences of sexual harassment at work over the last twelve months. These were translated from Swedish by the authors.[8] We count a person as having experienced harassment if they answer affirmatively to any of these questions. Because the questions contain examples of harassing behaviors, but largely leave it to the respondent to recall things that happened to them, the resulting variable has elements of a list-based measurement, but is largely subjective.

The first two questions are formulated as follows: "In the following questions, sexual harassment is defined as unwelcome physical actions or offensive remarks or innuendos on subject matter that is commonly associated with sex." Respondents are then asked if, in the last twelve months, they experienced these behaviors 1) from supervisors or colleagues, or 2) from other people (for example, customers, patients, clients, passengers, or students). These questions contain examples of sexual hostility as well as unwanted sexual attention.

The third question is formulated as:

> Have you been exposed to behaviors other than the ones above, which degraded you or violated your integrity, and were based on your gender? This could include condescending and ridiculing statements about women or men in general or in your occupation. It could also include that someone, because of your gender, ignored you or what you were saying. Have you experienced any such harassment from colleagues or supervisors in the last twelve months?

For this question we lack information about people other than colleagues or supervisors. The question includes a typical example of sexist hostility– condescending and ridiculing comments– but also includes an example of [illegible].[9] Having your person or opinion ignored because of your gender is closer

to this workplace misbehavior than to sexual harassment. The inclusion of this

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- Treated you differently because of your sex?
- Displayed, used, or distributed sexist or sexually suggestive materials?
- Made offensive sexist remarks?
- Put you down or was condescending to you because of your sex?

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- Repeatedly told sexual stories or jokes that were offensive to you?
- Whistled, called, or hooted at you in a sexual way?
- Made unwelcome attempts to draw you into a discussion of sexual matters?
- Made crude and offensive sexual remarks, either publicly or to you privately?
- Made offensive remarks about your appearance, body or sexual activities?
- Made gestures or used body language of a sexual nature which embarrassed or offended you?
- Exposed themselves physically in a way that embarrassed you or made you feel uncomfortable?

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- Made attempts to establish a romantic sexual relationship with you despite your efforts to discourage it?
- Stared, leered, or ogled you in a way that made you feel uncomfortable?
- Continued to ask you for dates, drinks, dinner, etc., even though you said "No"?
- Touched you in a way that made you feel uncomfortable?
- Made unwanted attempts to stroke, fondle, or kiss you?
- Attempted to have sex with you without your consent or against your will, but was unsuccessful?
- Had sex with you without your consent or against your will?

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- Made you feel like you were being bribed with some sort of reward or special treatment to engage in sexual behavior?
- Made you feel threatened with some sort of retaliation for not being sexually cooperative?
- Treated you badly for refusing to have sex?
- Implied faster promotions or better treatment if you were sexually cooperative?
- Made you afraid you would be treated poorly if you didn't cooperate sexually?

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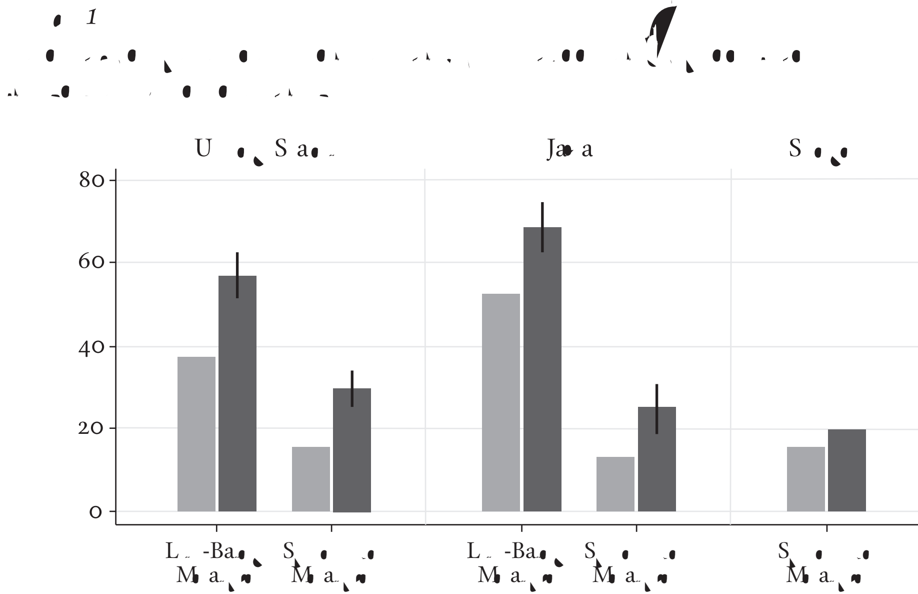
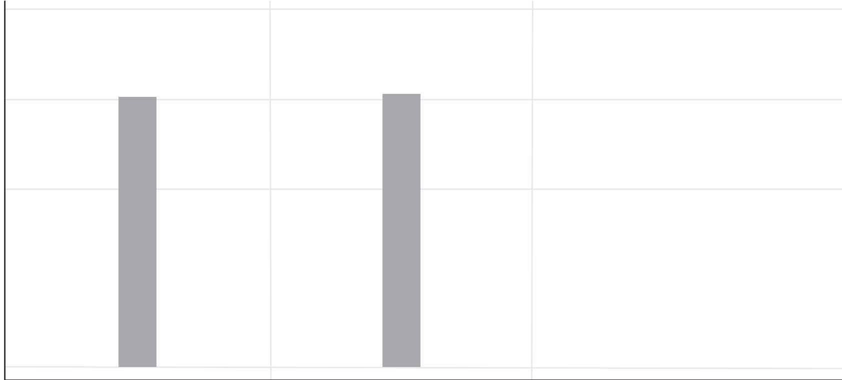
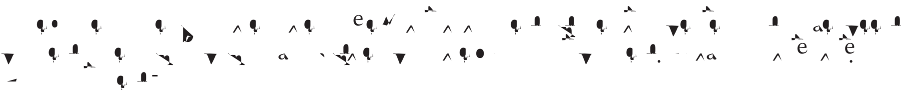



percent) for the list-based measure, and nearly 100 percent higher for the subjective measure (30 versus 16 percent). In Japan, supervisors report a 30 percent higher rate than employees using the list-based measure (68 versus 52 percent) and, similar to the United States, almost 100 percent higher for the subjective measure (25 versus 13 percent). Table W4 in the Web Appendix breaks down women's experiences across the four types of sexual harassment (as defined in Table 1). In both the United States and Japan, where the data allow this breakdown, women supervisors are the subjects of more harassment across all four categories. Before turning to possible explanations of these results, we further disaggregate the results by looking at differences across higher and lower positions of leadership, and across variation in the sex-compositions of subordinates.

We first compare women supervisors by the sex-composition of their subordinates, divided into the three categories of "mostly male," "mostly female," or





small number of executives in the sample makes this comparison somewhat unreliable. In the United States, the harassment rate is lower for the top two positions than for the lower levels of leadership, but is still higher than for women employees. The reverse U-shapes for both countries show that women in low- and mid-level leadership positions face the highest harassment rates. These are, of course, the women who are on the career track to top positions in the future.

Several additional aspects of these patterns are worthy of discussion. First, we find that women supervisors are not subject to fewer episodes of harassment (see the Web Appendix Table W3). Reports of high-frequency harassment are rare, but are in fact more common among supervisors than nonsupervisors.

Second, we might wonder about the role that a woman's age plays in the relationship between leadership and harassment. Comparing supervisors and nonsupervisors of the same age shows a larger gap because younger women are more likely to be the target of harassment and, simultaneously, less likely to be supervisors. Controlling for age, the level of harassment of supervisors is striking.

Third, perhaps the most relevant critique of our analysis so far might be that supervisors are more likely than others to describe events that happened to them as "sexual harassment," and/or to recall such events. Supervisors could be more aware of harassment because of education or status, or because they themselves are responsible for workplace policies to eradicate harassment.[18] If these differences exist, the gap in harassment exposure that we find between supervisors and employees could reflect perceptions rather than actual experiences.

In the United States, the nonsupervisors were, if anything, [illegible] likely to define behaviors as sexual harassment when we asked respondents whether or not they considered four of the items on the Sexual Experiences Questionnaire to be "sexual harassment." A slightly smaller proportion of supervisors said that they would "definitely" or "probably" define the behavior of "repeatedly telling sexual stories or offensive jokes" as harassment (76 versus 81 percent). Very similar rates were also recorded for "treating others differently because of their sex" (66 versus 64 percent) and for "staring, leering or ogling another person in a way that make them feel uncomfortable" (80 versus 83 percent). A high but slightly lower proportion of supervisors (80 versus 86 percent) said that "Making another person feel threatened with some sort of retaliation for not being sexually cooperative" was "probably" or "definitely" sexual harassment.

Why do women supervisors experience more sexual harassment? Sexual harassment is sometimes about sexual desire, but other times may be about status equalization. Consciously or subconsciously, the harasser may want to "put women in their place." For example, laboratory studies have shown that men are more likely to harass feminist than feminine women.[19] Such negative treatment of women supervisors could be linked to a distaste for fe-

male supervision.[20] This distaste could also grow out of unconscious bias about appropriate behaviors and social roles for women and men. Leadership is generally considered a male activity, making a man the prototypical manager and a woman manager a deviation from the norm. Negative reactions that stem precisely from this type of norm deviation are a fundamental part of theory in sociology and economics about how social norms are maintained. Retaliation against peo-

those who answered affirmatively to any item on the Sexual Experiences Questionnaire were asked, in turn, to recall which incidents formed part of the most "significant event" in the last year. For this significant event, they were asked to check boxes indicating the identity of the perpetrator(s), allowing multiple answers. These responses are summarized in the top panel (A) of Table 2. In the bottom panel, we further restrict the sample to include only women who were subjected to sexual harassment.

In both countries, supervisors stand out as being harassed more by "a person in a higher position than your direct boss." This perpetrator group is 25 to 40 percent more common among supervisors than among employees in the United States, and 60 to 85 percent more common among supervisors than employees in Japan. Another difference, which can only be detected in the U.S. survey due to the structure of the survey, is harassment from subordinates. Supervisors were more likely to be harassed by subordinates, but less likely than employees to be harassed by colleagues at the same level. The difference in perpetrator groups—with supervisors being harassed more by subordinates and higher-up managers—supports the theory that moving into a position of leadership means exposure to different types of perpetrators in the workplace.

Women supervisors may, paradoxically, be , likely to formally complain about sexual harassment, which could embolden potential perpetrators. This follows the intuition that a person with a latent propensity to harass will do so if the risk of punishment is sufficiently small. Harassing a female supervisor would seem irrational if she can directly punish the assailant herself or readily access the internal complaint procedure within the firm. But using these tools may come at a greater cost for women supervisors. Women supervisors may have more to lose, both in workplace status and in the legitimacy of their leadership. Having already invested more time in climbing the career ladder in the organization, women leaders could risk more career and status losses from reporting an incident compared with women employees.

Our surveys in the United States and Japan asked women to report which actions they took after being sexually harassed. Female supervisors, we found, were slightly more likely to take action than female workers in Japan, and decidedly more likely to act in the U.S. case. Japanese women supervisors were as likely or less likely to report to their boss or to a consultancy service within the firm (6 versus 7 percent for list-based reporting, but 6 versus 14 percent using subjective reporting). They were, however, about twice as likely to report to an agency outside the firm, where options in the survey included a labor union, a bureau of labor, a company that dispatched the worker, the police, a lawyer, the municipality, or a nonprofit organization. Among supervisors, 27 percent reported the harassment to an entity outside the firm in the case of list-based sexual harassment, and 13 percent for subjective harassment.

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[illegible]

| [illegible] | [illegible] | [illegible] | [illegible] | [illegible] | [illegible] | [illegible] |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| [illegible] | | | | | | |
| [illegible] | | | | | | |
| Employees | 0.31 | 0.14 | 0.47 | | 0.21 | 0.05 |
| Supervisors | 0.31 | 0.19 | 0.46 | | 0.17 | 0.12 |
| [illegible] | | | | | | |
| Employees | 0.57 | 0.15 | 0.24 | 0.13 | 0.18 | |
| Supervisors | 0.53 | 0.24 | 0.22 | 0.18 | 0.24 | |
| [illegible] | | | | | | |
| [illegible] | | | | | | |
| Employees | 0.39 | 0.15 | 0.47 | | 0.23 | 0.05 |
| Supervisors | 0.34 | 0.21 | 0.47 | | 0.21 | 0.13 |
| [illegible] | | | | | | |
| Employees | 0.70 | 0.15 | 0.20 | 0.18 | 0.17 | |
| Supervisors | 0.63 | 0.28 | 0.20 | 0.20 | 0.14 | |

[illegible]

U.S. supervisors were more likely than employees to take all three types of action: issue a personal protest, report within the organization, and report outside the organization. Eighteen to 20 percent of supervisors who reported harassment took personal action compared with approximately 14 percent of employees. Nearly one-third of the supervisors took action within the firm, compared with 12 to 20 percent of employees. Outside help was sought by 13 to 21 percent of

supervisors, compared with just 5 to 8 percent of employees. In sum, there is no evidence that women supervisors would be more attractive targets of harassment by being , likely to take action, either personally or using actors inside or outside the workplace.

So far, we have shown that despite having more power in the workplace to take action when they face sexual harassment, Japanese supervisors are not more likely to do so than employees. We conducted a survey experiment to shed light on a possible reason for this. The experiment targeted third-party advice to report sexual harassment within organizations. By using conjoint experimental methods, respondents were asked if they would recommend that certain women, described by a list of traits, should seek organizational assistance. The methods allow us to causally isolate the impact of women's supervisory status relative to employee (nonsupervisory) status on third-party advice to report. Japanese respondents reacted to the trait of a woman victim's supervisory status by becoming 7.2 percentage points less likely to advise her to seek assistance (standard error = 0.02). U.S. respondents, in contrast, did not differentiate between supervisors and employees in this regard. These results are described in the Web Appendix section called Conjoint Analysis. They suggest that more negative attitudes among bystanders toward women supervisors' reporting of harassment in Japan could be a reason for the relative inaction of these women supervisors.

Japanese survey respondents explained in free-text answers why they recommended women supervisors not to seek organizational assistance. Among three hundred such answers, a common theme was that seeking assistance would be viewed as a managerial failure on the part of the victim. Responses included, for example, that "A female supervisor who reports an incident will be viewed as having low capabilities for being unable to avoid or manage the harassment" and, similarly, that "She could have avoided the harassment in advance if she is in a supervisor position."

In a final set of empirical results, we turn our attention to the consequences of sexual harassment and whether these consequences differ between supervisors and employees. Our surveys in the United States and Japan contain two questions on consequences. These were divided into two types– social and professional– following on the work of psychologists Vicki Magley and Lilia Cortina.[28] Professional consequences are tangible, formal, and possible to document in employment records, and might include discharge, involuntary transfers, demotions, poor pe, 57,(oid l, if)ns,

ual harassment. We plot the difference in the proportion of supervisors and employees that reported each consequence in Figure 4. The whiskers around each difference denote a 95 percent confidence interval for the difference in proportions.

There are two main takeaways from the analysis. First, supervisors face [illegible], not fewer, negative consequences of being sexually harassed. One reason for this could be the pattern we uncovered of who harasses: higher-level managers are more likely to be the perpetrators. Another reason might be that supervisors are more likely to take action against their harassers, which could trigger the retaliation against them. The fact that U.S. women, and U.S. supervisors in particular, were more likely to take action could perhaps explain the differences between the United States and Japan. In both countries, however, women who reported their harassment faced negative consequences.

In Japan, two consequences stand out: 1) more harassment, and 2) a greater

or training. These results suggest that in both countries, supervisors have more to lose from sexual harassment.

Sexual harassment is a severe workplace problem. Roughly half of all women can expect to experience it at some point in their work lives.[29] This prevalence of harassment has been highlighted by the large #MeToo movement and the numerous reports and convictions of sexual harassment that followed.[30]

Our evidence refutes the idea that workplace power insulates women from sexual harassment. To the contrary, power is associated with [illegible] harassment, at least for women climbing the ladder toward higher positions of leadership. One reason for this pattern could be that workplace power exposes women to different groups of potential harassers. Supervisors are the focal point of subordinates and also have more interactions with higher-ups in the organization. We do not find, moreover, that supervisors are less likely to report harassment. Supervisors are at least as likely as employees to confront the harasser, to report within the organiza-

*Quarterly Journal of Economics* *American Economic Review* *American Political Science Review* *Social Policy and Administration*

**Seiki Tanaka** *Economics and Politics* *Governance* *Politics and Gender* *European Journal of Political Research*

**Yasuka Tateishi**

*Sexual Harassment of Working Women: A Case of Sex Discrimination*

*The Gender Gap in Psychotherapy*

*American Economic Review*

*American Sociological Review*

*Sexual Harassment in the Federal Workplace: Trends, Progress, Continuing Challenges*

*Acta Sociologica*

*Journal of Economic Literature*

*Economica*

*Annual Review of Sociology*

*International Journal of Management Reviews*

*APA Handbook of the Psychology of Women: Perspectives on Women's Private and Public Lives*

*Academy of Management Review*

SEQ D D *Military Psychology*

*The Quarterly Journal of Economics*

*Gender & Society*

*Journal of Applied Psychology*

*The Economics of Discrimination*

*Gender & Society*

*Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*

*Sexual Harassment of Working Women*