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# Sexual harassment in higher education – a systematic review

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## ABSTRACT

Sexual harassment is an epidemic throughout global higher education systems and impact individuals, groups and entire organizations in profound ways. Precarious working conditions, hierarchical organizations, a normalization of gender-based violence, toxic academic masculinities, a culture of silence and a lack of active leadership are all key features enabling sexual harassment. The aim of this study is to review scientific knowledge on sexual harassment in higher education. A thematic focus is on (a) knowledge derived from top-ranked peer-reviewed articles in the research field, (b) the prevalence of sexual harassment among students and staff, (c) reported consequences of sexual harassment, (d) examples of primary, secondary and tertiary preventive measures, and (e) core challenges to research on sexual harassment in higher education. The published research evidence suggests several findings of importance, mainly: (a) prevalence of sexual harassment among students is reported by on average one out of four female students; (b) severe consequences of sexual harassment impacts individuals but the effects on the quality in research and education is unknown; (c) there is almost no evidence supporting the supposed effects of major preventive measures; and (d) research on sexual harassment in higher education lacks theoretical, longitudinal, qualitative and intersectional approaches and perspectives.

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Sexual harassment; higher education; systematic review; prevalence; consequences; prevention; research

## Introduction

The unnamed should not be mistaken for the non-existent. (MacKinnon 1979, 27–28)

One in every three women in the world is exposed to physical and/or sexual violence from a partner or sexual violence from another person (UN Women 2019; WHO 2013). More than 2.6 billion women live in countries where rape within marriage is still not considered a crime (UN Women 2019). 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 men's violence against women (WHO 2011; World Economic Forum 2017). In the EU member states, between 45 and 55 per cent of women (corresponding to around 100

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million women) have experienced exposure to sexual harassment during their working lives (Latcheva 2017). 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 (Tavares and Wodon 2018).

For a long time, women's movements in a global perspective have highlighted issues about women's bodily vulnerability in relation to other forms of repression. Men's violence in general, men's violence against women, sexualized violence, prostitution, human trafficking (for sexual purpose specifically), rape in close relationships and rape as a means of war, as well as a number of other forms of violence (Ptacek 2010), form a web of actual and potential exposure to violence for a majority of the world's women and girls. It is in this web of violence that sexual harassment of women (and men, and non-binary persons) at work is established and normalized, but also problematized and challenged in various ways.

We use the concept of gender-based violence as a framework for understanding gender harassment, sexual harassment, sexual assault, date rape violence and other forms of gendered violence (Latcheva 2017). In other words, sexual harassment is part of a continuum of different forms of actual and potential forms of gender-based violence residing in higher education systems, ranging from bullying and sexist jargon to sexual abuse and rape. This is also in line with the current understanding promoted in a large-scale evaluation of national incentives on sexual harassment in EU member states (SWG GRI 2020).

Discourses on discrimination and sexual violence during the 1970s (MacKinnon 1979) shifted into juridical discourses and a focus on prevalence of sexual harassment during the mid-1980s (Gutek 1985; Gutek and Morasch 1982). Researching prevalence has since then dominated the global research field on sexual harassment in workplaces. Legal definitions and quantitative studies came to guide research through surveys and scales for testing vulnerability and sexuality in the decade to come (Fitzgerald et al. 1988; Magley et al. 1999). Gradually, knowledge on sexualized violence, power and unequal gender conditions were replaced by an individualistic and legislative version of exposure to sexual harassment. In the international research field on sexual harassment and higher education, the development of concepts and delimitations has been quite similar. Other types of gender-based violence, for example, are seldom intersected in research on sexual harassment during 1985–2005. Instead, focus is placed more specifically on legal, organizational, psychological and ethnological aspects of exposure (Pina, Gannon, and Saunders 2009).

In studies on sexual harassment in higher education from regions other than north/west, different issues are in the foreground, such as unwanted pregnancies or HIV prevention, or various direct and indirect consequences of poverty (access issues, support requirements). More concrete problems are also addressed regularly, for example demands from male teachers for sexual services from female students in order for them to receive a valid examination certificate from their studies (Morley 2011). During the last ten-year period a profound change has occurred though, with young researchers contributing new concepts and perspectives (not least intersectionality), new forms of exposure are focused (sexual harassment online, experiences of minorities), and a recapture of theories on violence, structure and organization can be discerned. And in our days, #Metoo has given voice to sexual harassment as a global epidemic residing in all strands of life.

There are already several research reviews partly covering research on sexual harassment in higher education. They are important contributions to knowledge on prevalence,

prevention, research methodology and other issues, and share some common traits: using meta-analytic literature reviews in order to comprise relevant data and knowledge, covering specific periods of time, focusing on the higher education sector as such, dealing with the conceptual framework for sexual harassment, and so forth. They also have certain limitations, as these research reviews are delimited to research on prevalence on campuses only (Fedina, Holmes, and Backes 2018); focus certain areas of higher education such as medicine (Fnais et al. 2014) and specific marginalized groups (McClelland et al. 2015); deal with sexual harassment on staff but not students (Henning et al. 2017); are targeting a limited period of time or foremost focus specific methodological issues such as research context and participants in earlier studies (Voth Schrag 2017).

In this particular study we try to overcome these earlier limitations. A systematic search process in existing databases covered the entire time period from which research on sexual harassment and higher education has been published (1966–2017). We summarize studies on both students and staff as well as include research from the global south/east and try to evoke the recurrent focus on USA in the research field. Also, we cover a broad range of themes central to the research field such as prevalence, prevention, case management, support structures, research methodology and theoretical and conceptual frameworks, etc.

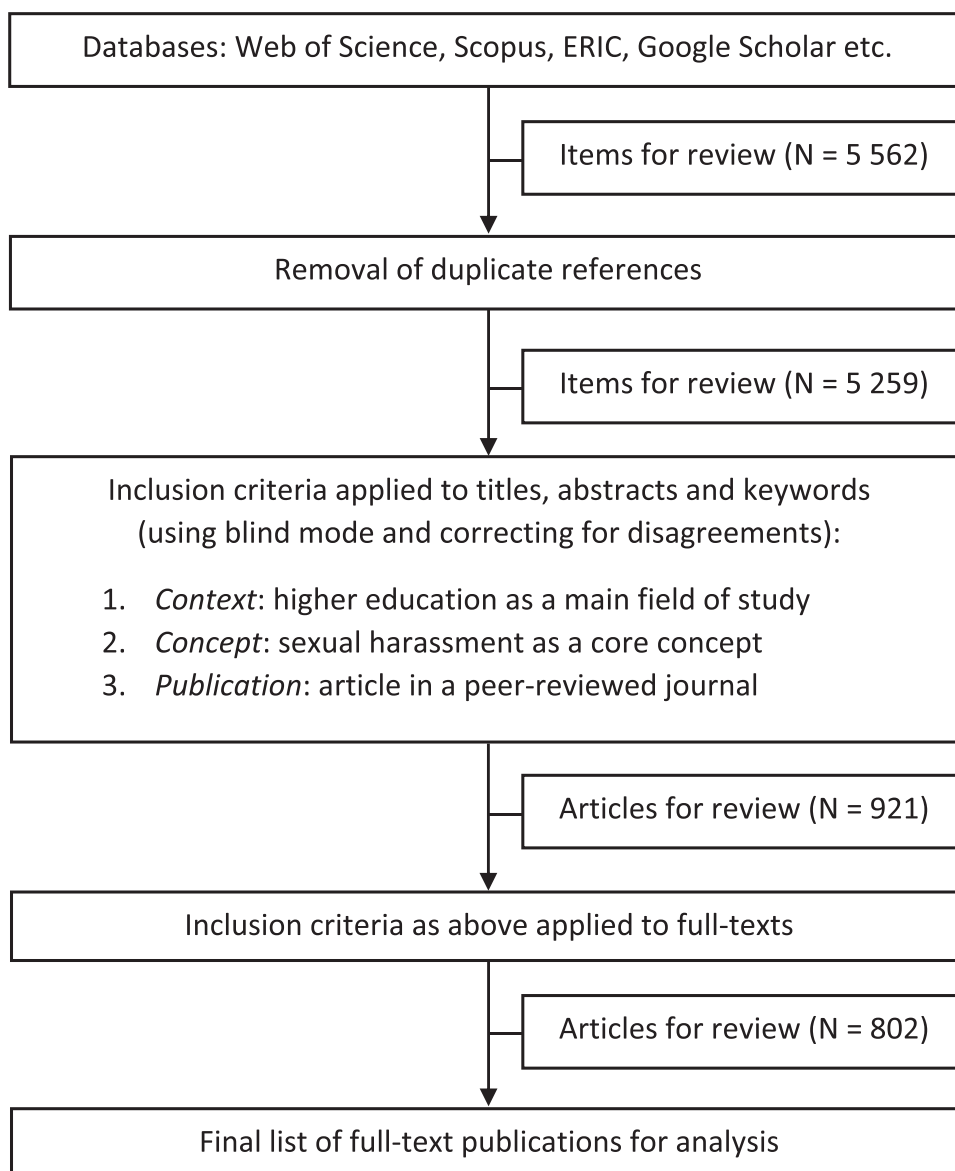
Of course, there are also limitations to our study presented here. It is not possible to give credit to all research studies in the entire research field as it covers more than 5000 individual publications. Instead, we have selected more than 800 of them (15 per cent of all studies) using stringent criteria for selection and cross-researcher validation. The results presented in this context are therefore a brief summary and analysis of a large research field, trying to cover main themes and issues on sexual harassment in global higher education. The article is a summary and development of two recently published, large-scale international research reviews (Bondestam and Lundqvist 2018, 2020) which implies several aspects of relevance are left out in this context. Foremost, we have omitted an in-depth analysis of theoretical and methodological constraints in the research field as well as mainly focused on general findings and tendencies without incorporating a more nuanced analysis of the way the field of research transforms and changes over time.

## Method

### *Data collection and analysis*

The quality of an international research review tackling a large and diversified research field, expanding over more than 50 years, correlates directly with how systematically the literature search is done. KvinnSam at the University of Gothenburg Library<sup>1</sup> was contracted for the task of assisting the Swedish Secretariat for Gender Research with scientifically based search processes. The complete search processes, as well as some in-depth analysis of certain aspects in this material, is described in other publications (Bondestam and Lundqvist 2018, 2020). In this article we focus mainly on overall and general results from the complete research field as described below ( $N = 802$ ), but foremost referring to its main publications. The process for data selection and analysis is described schematically in Figure 1.

The following databases were used for the main search process: ERIC (Educational Resources Information Center), ERC (Education Research Complete), Web of Science



**Figure 1.** Data selection and analysis step-by-step.

(Core Collection), Gender studies database, Google Scholar, Scopus, and Sociological abstracts. A complementary search process also screened relevant Nordic databases, including Diva, Libris and SwePub (Sweden), Bibliotek.dk (Denmark), Norart and Oria.no (Norway), Gegnir.is (Iceland), Helka and MELINDA (Finland), KVINFO (Denmark), and NordPub (Nordic countries). These search processes, performed by KvinnSam, resulted in a total of 5 259 items (after deleting 303 duplicates) using the following search string: (('sexual harass\*' OR (harass\* AND sex\*)) AND (universit\* OR college\* OR academ\* OR 'higher education' OR work\* OR organization\*)) NOT (child\* OR school\*). This list of publications spans 1966–2017, has no geographical limits, and

includes all types of publications (i.e. not only articles in journals but also dissertations, book chapters, conference proceedings, book reviews, etc.).

The analysis of such a large set of data ( $N = 5259$ ) is almost impossible to achieve without rigorous criteria, selection processes which are validated, and foremost comprehensive delineations which are used strictly by involved researchers. All 5259 items were registered in a free beta-version of the online tool Rayyan QCR1 (Ouzzani et al. 2016) including title, abstract, authors, keywords and several other criteria. We went through all publications for inclusion, using individual set blind mode enabling cross-researcher validation, following three specific criteria: (a) higher education as a main field of study, (b) sexual harassment as a core concept, and (c) published article in a peer-reviewed journal. After correcting for items we had disagreed on we had a list of 912 items after this process.

In the next step we used a thematic approach to the research field made possible through selective search processes in Rayyan. We started clustering the items by using search terms found in titles, abstracts and keywords, focusing prevalence, consequences, prevention, theory, method and so forth. Such concepts functioned as preliminary 'umbrellas' and then we continuously added more specified concepts in different search processes. For example, searching for publications in the list of 912 items related to 'prevention' implied using the following set of sub-concepts: prev\*, polic\*, educ\*, train\*, primary, secondary, tertiary, complaint, case, support, etc. Sub-concepts for different themes emerged constantly from reading through abstracts, just as main themes developed and were adjusted accordingly. This process resulted in a set of 16 different themes and several subconcepts. Finally, we gathered all items as full-texts and did a systematic read-through based on the identified themes, which in turn reduced the list of items (by using the same criteria as before on full-texts) to a final set of publications for analysis ( $N = 802$ ).

A specific search process was performed in order to extract top-ranked peer-reviewed articles from the research field on sexual harassment in higher education. 30 peer-reviewed articles were extracted from the total list ( $N = 802$ ), using Web of Science with Scopus as a reference database, and arranged according to field-normalized citation by KvinnSam in line with recommendations from the Swedish Research Council. The criteria for inclusion based on content analysis are: (a) sexual harassment shall be the main focus, but comparison with other issues of exposure is permitted, and (b) higher education is in focus, but comparison with other sectors is permitted (for further details, cf. Bondestam and Lundqvist 2018).

## Results

This presentation of results provides an overview of past and current knowledge in international research on sexual harassment in higher education. When overlooking the entire research field, some core results are possible to discern as a way to frame the analysis. Gender harassment is the most common form of exposure within higher education according to this research field. Sexual harassment as a more specific form of gender-based violence occurs in all disciplines in higher education and is reported by all groups (students, doctoral students, all staff). Students, younger women, women with insecure employment conditions and certain minorities (ethnicity and sexuality) are more

exposed to sexual harassment than other groups. Sexual harassment has severe consequences for students and staff in terms of physical, psychological and professional short- and long-term effects. More than half of students and faculty experiencing sexual harassment do not report the events to management. Research focusing on intersectional dimensions in relation to sexual harassment in higher education is limited. Research that focuses mainly on perpetrators is almost not to be found in the analysed material.

We now turn to main findings from top-ranked peer-reviewed articles on sexual harassment in higher education, which is described shortly in order to contextualize the research field. Further, we will summarize general results from the studied research field in four thematic sections covering prevalence, consequences, prevention and future research.

### ***Top-ranked peer-reviewed articles***

Focusing on the top-ranked peer-reviewed articles in a specific research field can bring with it both an understanding of the knowledge produced in the field, but also give an interesting picture of normative understandings of the research subject per se. Therefore, in order to contextualize and guide a discussion about challenges and limitations recurrent in the research field as a whole, this section summarizes main findings from top-ranked peer-reviewed articles in the research field on sexual harassment in higher education (Adams, Kottke, and Padgitt 1983; Benson and Thomson 1982; Bruce et al. 2015; Cantalupo 2014; Clancy et al. 2014; Coker et al. 2015, 2016; Cortina et al. 1998; D'augelli 1992; Finn 2004; Fnais et al. 2014; Gelfand, Fitzgerald, and Drasgow 1995; Gersen and Suk 2016; Herek 1993; Kenig and Ryan 1986; Komaromy et al. 1993; Magnavita and Heponiemi 2011; Martin-Storey and August 2016; Nora et al. 2002; Ong 2005; Padgitt and Padgitt 1986; Reilly, Lott, and Gallogly 1986; Robnett 2016; Schneider 1987; Schneider, Swan, and Fitzgerald 1997; Selkie et al. 2015; Settles et al. 2006; Somers 1982; Wolf et al. 1991).

All articles concern primarily higher education and sexual harassment. In some cases, other forms of exposure are also analysed, and there are some examples of comparative approaches (nationally and internationally with other organizations, both private and public sector). The texts were published between 1982 and 2016, with an emphasis on studies published before 1993 (12 items) and after 2014 (10 items) in medical, legal, psychological, criminological and gender studies journals. Empirically, all studies are situated in USA, with the exception of one study from Italy. A few articles also include comparative approaches and empirical data from Japan and Brazil. Most of the studies focus on prevalence of sexual harassment among female students and often campus-based exposure in various forms. Medicine and STEM are the subject areas covered more specifically, but a majority of the publications include multi-disciplinary studies of a certain campus or higher education institution. The research studies vary to some extent theoretically, methodologically and in terms of concepts used. But they foremost have certain aspects in common, such as the use of legislative definitions of sexual harassment as a point of departure. Further, they all rely on relatively limited and often uncontrolled cross-sectional data, a shortage of statistical and analytical tools (applies in particular to descriptive studies in the 1980s), and a one-sided and binary understanding of gender which underestimates the diversity of exposure to sexual harassment.



Summing up the core results from the most highly cited research papers in scientific journals in this study, we can conclude that exposure to sexual harassment in higher education varies between 11 and 73 per cent for heterosexual women (median 49 per cent) and between 3 and 26 per cent for heterosexual men (median 15 per cent). In these studies, exposure to sexual harassment is generally highest for female students at lower levels of education. Exposure to sexual assault and threats of sexualized violence is decreasing over time in the studies analysed, at the same time as exposure to sexual harassment remains relatively constant. New types of exposure are established in later studies compared to earlier ones, and they relate in particular to online sexual harassment, where prevalence is alarmingly high in studies that analyse this within the research field as a whole (cf. Megan et al. 2016; Poland 2016).

It is notable that most of the publications, on a more or less routine basis, highlight issues about problems with prevalence and measurability, underreporting, failing systems for case handling, needs for basic knowledge about sexual harassment in several ways, etc. That is to say, despite the top-ranked articles spanning a period of almost 30 years, they argue in the same words about gaps in knowledge and implementation needs. One explanation may of course be that they are part of markedly context-specific (USA, campus, social science perspectives) citation and referencing practices, which can tend to homogenize normative claims for how sexual harassment shall be described and understood. At the same time, it can also be seen as a reflection of the actual preventive practices at higher education institutions, as well as challenges of the research field in question, not having changed in any significant way during the period. However, it is clear that online harassment and a stronger focus on the experiences of non-heterosexuals constitutes a shift over time in the focus of research and recommendations. To some extent, it is also possible to discern a development in terms of methods used, in particular after the attempts in the 1990s to use tests, parametric scales and to strive for a common concept definition to seek consensus in the research field on what sexual harassment is.

### **Prevalence**

The issue of prevalence (the total number of cases in relation to a population) is discussed in a majority of peer-reviewed journal articles for this systematic review. Several factors relating to legal structures, national contexts, use of concepts and definitions, methodology, sample size and diversity, underreporting etc. all affect the output from studies on prevalence (Henning et al. 2017; McDonald 2012). The consequence of these challenges is that figures for exposure to sexual harassment may vary greatly.

According to a review of 74 European studies, for example, the figure varied between 17 and 81 per cent for women in working life in general (Timmerman and Bajema 1999). Estimates from USA claims that 40–75 per cent of women and 13–31 per cent of men have been exposed to sexual harassment in the workplace (Aggarwal and Gupta 2000). In a large study on prevalence in the EU member states approximately 50 per cent of all women in working life had experienced sexual harassment since the age of 15 (Latcheva 2017), although the variation between countries as well as sectors is considerable. A similar variation in exposure to sexual harassment is reported in research on the situation of medical students, for example, where studies of sexual harassment show a prevalence



between 3 and 93 per cent, while exposure to sex discrimination is stated to be between 19 and 92 per cent of all respondents (Fnais et al. 2014).

When reviewing studies on prevalence of sexual harassment in higher education we conclude that well-cited, international studies also show a large variation in prevalence; from 2 to 93 percent depending on a variety of factors. Approximately 20–25 per cent of female students in USA have experienced sexual harassment according to several major studies. The numbers are slightly lower for female staff in general (Henning et al. 2017). Studies based on a large and wide selection of respondents, which include detailed questions on experiences of sexual harassment and/or marginalized groups with limited influence over their situation, result in a higher reported incidence of sexual harassment (McDonald 2012; Till 1980; cf. Bondestam and Lundqvist 2018 for further details). The prevalence of sexual assault on students (primarily women) at universities in USA is also well-documented. Data suggest 22 per cent of college women have experienced dating violence and nearly 20 per cent have experienced completed or attempted sexual assault since entering college (Voth Schrag 2017; also cf. Fedina, Holmes, and Backes 2018).

Quite few studies investigate groups that might run a greater risk of being exposed to sexual harassment due to being already in a marginalized position, such as lesbian and bisexual women, students with functional disabilities, students race-typed as non-white, and students with previous experiences of sexual violence. Though, for all these groups there is evidence of a higher degree of exposure to sexual harassment and other forms of gender-based violence. When overviewing the international research field, also taking into account publications outside USA and Western Europe, the evidence shows that students, younger women, women with insecure employment conditions and certain minorities (ethnicity and sexuality) are more exposed to sexual harassment than other groups (D'augelli 1992; Fedina, Holmes, and Backes 2018; Ong 2005; Vladutiu, Martin, and Macy 2011).

There is nothing to suggest that the proportion of university students experiencing sexual harassment (especially in USA where a majority of studies are found) is decreasing over time (Fnais et al. 2014). Though, there are often mixed results in research on prevalence over time, despite replicable longitudinal studies using identical methodology. Socio-culturally changed understandings of sexual harassment over time, both ones own and that of others, are one of several aspects affecting the perception of exposure (McDonald 2012).

### **Consequences**

There is strong agreement in the research field that the consequences of sexual harassment are manifold and serious, irrespective of whether the focus of research is employees in working life in general or students and staff in higher education specifically. Consequences of sexual harassment in higher education institutions are coming ever more into focus as the research field develops – with psychological, epidemiological and organizational approaches for example showing that factors such as ill health, motivation and dropout rates from studies are impacted – which is also in parallel an important part of research into sexual harassment on the labour market in general (Barling et al. 1996; Chan et al. 2008; Harned et al. 2002; Lapierre, Spector, and Leck 2005; Willness, Steel, and Lee 2007).

Exposure to sexual harassment in higher education leads to physical, psychological and professional consequences for individuals. Examples such as irritation, anger, stress, discomfort, feelings of powerlessness and degradation are recurrent in research literature. Evidence-based research confirms more specifically that sexual harassment in higher education can lead to depression (Martin-Storey and August 2016; Selkie et al. 2015), anxiety (Richman et al. 1999; Schneider, Swan, and Fitzgerald 1997), post-traumatic stress disorder (Henning et al. 2017), physical pain (Chan et al. 2008), unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases (Philpart et al. 2009), increased alcohol use (Fedina, Holmes, and Backes 2018; McDonald 2012; Selkie et al. 2015), impaired career opportunities (Henning et al. 2017), reduced job motivation (Barling et al. 1996; Chan et al. 2008; Harned et al. 2002), and more. Specific job-related factors often include absence, decreased job satisfaction, engagement and productivity, decreased self-confidence and self-image, and persons giving notice from their jobs (Lapierre, Spector, and Leck 2005; Willness, Steel, and Lee 2007). Even observing or hearing about a colleague's exposure to sexual harassment can generate 'bystander stress' and also cause conflicts in the work team (McDonald 2012; Willness, Steel, and Lee 2007).

Research on the consequences of sexual harassment for work teams, work environments and organizational culture in higher education is scarce though, albeit these are frequently reported aspects of interest for further research. Direct costs to organizations, on the other hand, are well-documented in the form of high personnel turnover resulting in a need for expensive recruitment and introduction of new employees, as well as time and resources spent on investigating incidents. Specifically for USA, a certain consequence of sexual harassment is also possible high legal costs for court cases if incidents are reported to the police. More indirect costs for organizations includes reduced workplace morale and job motivation among employees, and 'poor reputation' for the workplace as such (Henning et al. 2017), albeit research evidence on the effects on quality in research and education is unclear.

### **Prevention**

Reading and conducting searches in the complete research field a number of themes concerning prevention of sexual harassment in higher education emerges. These themes reflect an understanding of preventive efforts which is well in line with an established understanding of the chain of prevention against gender-based violence more generally (primary, secondary and tertiary prevention), and consist foremost of policy, education and training, case management and support structures. In addition to these themes, there are also some research evidence suggesting the importance of bystander programmes, active leadership skills and other organizational factors. In the following section we discuss these aspects in turn in more detail (also cf. Bondestam and Lundqvist 2020). Sometimes research evidence is lacking from the higher education sector why we partly rely on research evidence from nearby organizational studies in these instances.

### **Policy**

Research on policies to prevent sexual harassment in higher education suggests they have to engage with the organizational culture, rather than focus on access to a procedure for case management, and also be based on the experiences of victims to sexual harassment

and other forms of gender-based violence (Marshall, Dalyot, and Galloway 2014; Zippel 2003). Further, policy should aim to function as protection for the right to self-determination and non-discrimination, be both individual- and group-based in terms of addressing experiences and responsibilities (Zippel 2001, 2003), and be implemented bottom-up or from the inside rather than top-down and from the outside (Bagley et al. 2012; Batchelor 1994; Bennett 2009). Finally, policy processes themselves, in order to be more effective and relevant, has to have a strong mandate from senior management, adequate resources, and be facilitated by legitimate and active case managers (Thomas 2004; also cf. Dare 2000; Scalia and Jiang 1994).

There is thus a vast number of journal articles recommending the use of policies as a core preventive measure, but at the same time there is almost no evidence-based research on the actual effects of policies on for example decreasing prevalence of sexual harassment. There is actually nothing to suggest that further efforts to strengthen the impact of policy on sexual harassment (information, communication, revising policies) will change under-reporting, policy awareness, or reporting behaviour as such (Lindenberg and Reese 1995; Reese and Lindenberg 2002). The importance of policy is therefore paradoxically highlighted in the research field.

Policies on sexual harassment in higher education tend to have a focus on individuals/women, legal entities and a structure for handling complaints (case management), while the perspectives of perpetrators (Howard 2009; also cf. Pina, Gannon, and Saunders 2009) and the ramifications for the broader work environment usually are missing. A weak or non-existent theoretical contextualization of sexual harassment combined with a lack of relevant knowledge (Tinkler 2013) – in other words an inability to describe the problem of sexual harassment in all its complexity (in particular feminist perspectives on intersectionality and links to related forms of gender-based violence in higher education) – further weakens both research on policy and policies as tools to prevent sexual harassment. There is clearly a gap between neoliberal, bureaucratic policy and critical knowledge on experiences of sexual harassment in a normative academic culture (Brorsen Smidt et al. 2018). This analysis of policy processes, especially in relation to legal systems, is also confirmed by other contemporary reviews on sexual harassment in higher education (Johnson, Widnall, and Frazier 2018).

### ***Education and training***

Research studies on education and training as primary preventive strategies mainly stem from disciplines such as pedagogy, HR and psychology. They include a range of different countries (although USA dominates), higher education institutions, organizational levels, and have a relatively narrow understanding of the concept of sexual harassment as point of departure (in principle, exclusively legal definitions). However, there is a clear dividing line between studies that have an almost purely experimental design, i.e. examining attitudes and responses to training in various forms within controlled environments, and research articles that are entirely focused on evaluation, discussing already completed education or training initiatives and their effects. It is also noteworthy that there are interesting research studies which deal with the advantages and disadvantages of web-based training, as well as studies that in various ways attempt to analyse the impact of different kinds of training interventions for specific target groups (managers, case managers, students in specific programmes, etc.). To a large extent, there are observed, positive

short-term effects of training on sexual harassment on participants' attitudes, but there are no evidence-based results suggesting more long-term effects on prevalence.

Summarizing all existing research studies is of course not doable in this short format, but some key features from evidence-based studies are that education and training has to (a) be sensitive to the sex of the instructor (Preusser, Bartels, and Nordstrom 2011), the gender composition of the group being trained (Blakely, Blakely, and Moorman 1998), and normative assumptions about gender (Tinkler, Gremillion, and Arthurs 2015; Tinkler, Yan Li, and Mollborn 2007); (b) reflect organization-specific conditions for preventing sexual harassment (Bainbridge, Perry, and Kulik 2018); (c) target active and passive resistance to change in general and knowledge about violence and vulnerability more specifically (Bainbridge, Perry, and Kulik 2018; also cf. Townsley and Geist 2000); (d) have support from senior management and the active participation of other managers (Blaxall, Parsonson, and Robertson 1993), and finally (e) use pedagogical methods which combines reflexive *and* affective learning (Ramson 2006; Welbrock 1999).

All these aspects serve as important strategies in order to try to close a general 'knowing-doing gap', i.e. the gap between having knowledge of what sexual harassment is and acting in a different way (Perry, Kulik, and Bustamante 2012; Perry et al. 2010; Perry, Kulik, and Field 2009). There is also a huge set of research studies examining the impact of education and training on sexual harassment on women and men respectively. There is no clear-cut consensus on which group benefits the most from training. Nevertheless, from these studies one can draw the general conclusion that men who *do not* participate in training on what constitutes sexual harassment are less inclined to see or define sexually harassing behaviours as in fact sexual harassment (Bingham and Scherer 2001; Walsh, Bauerle, and Magley 2013).

### **Case management**

Our systematic review suggests that there are no research-based evidence on formal mechanisms or case management structures dealing with experiences of sexual harassment in higher education, i.e. secondary prevention, which gives full reparation to victims. On the contrary, there is research evidence on the lack of (efficient and relevant) case management procedures. Several early studies focus on employers responsibility for establishing effective systems that allow individual employees to report sexual harassment, rather than seeking justification for case management systems strengthening the rights of individuals, or their demands and need for support or redress (Kors 1991; Meek and Lynch 1983; Robertson, Dyer, and Campbell 1988).

Later on researchers argue for *both* the need to refine and improve existing systems for case management and the implementation of policy on this *and* contain more research-based criticism of the whole idea that one could solve the problems of prevalence per se through a bureaucratization of victimization, largely through strengthening the victim's ability to make a complaint (Lee and Greenlaw 2000; Williams, Fitzgerald, and Drasgow 1999). In recent years some studies have developed models that are easily understood and applied and apparently functions well, and which take case management models a step further by having the stated aim of restorative justice in the form of redress for victims of sexual harassment (see for example Koss, Wilgus, and Williamsen 2014).

There are some studies pointing to that only a small proportion of all sexual harassment is reported formally, as is also the case for other types of sexual violence. Normally, formal

reports are not made, either through the internal processes of the workplace or via external structures. It is estimated that only between 5 and 30 per cent of all cases of sexual harassment are reported formally, and fewer than 1 per cent of those who do make a report take part in any legal process (McDonald 2012). So, in conclusion, an overall paradox between an ongoing and systematic underreporting of actual experiences of sexual harassment on the one hand, and the continuous updating of systems to manage complaints on the other, seemingly remains intact.

### ***Support structures***

Tertiary prevention is foremost about help and support to individuals exposed to sexual harassment, for example in terms of rehabilitation and follow-up. It is often recommended in research articles that especially the diversification of exposure to sexual harassment, relating both to different types of sexual harassment and sexual violence as well as to the exposure of various minority groups, should guide higher education institutions in their efforts to establish well-functioning support structures (Fedina, Holmes, and Backes 2018; Vladutiu, Martin, and Macy 2011).

Some researchers have worked systematically to prepare, test and evaluate various alternative approaches to complaints, starting out from the need to establish support structures for victims in the first instance whether or not case management is effective or not (Best et al. 2010) and also addressing the need for restorative justice for victims of sexual harassment (Koss, Wilgus, and Williamsen 2014). Such models often illustrate that the employer's responsibility does not end, but rather is ongoing and becomes more stringent, throughout the entire process of victimization. Similar studies have developed and tested support structures independent of other procedures and different case management systems (Grauerholz et al. 1999), which also is symptomatic of the shift in the research field during later years; suggestions for support structures move clearly from the periphery to being an integral part of case management systems (for examples, see Paludi 2016).

A number of different dialogue models are also to be found in recent research and their common denominator is the systematic establishment of accountability for the perpetrators' own violent actions. These models have mainly been developed in the contexts of criminology and psychology or have a bearing on research on men's violence against women and issues of sexual violence more generally. A few of these models have been validated with a number of different sample groups over time and in different contexts, among them a specific model (RESTORE) which has also been successfully tested in a higher education context in USA and New Zealand (Julich 2010; Koss 2010, 2014). Though, in sum and overlooking the entire research field and its contributions to knowledge on support structures in higher education concerning sexual harassment, it seems to be a lack of clear research support for a majority of existing measures actually having the intended effects (cf. also Hunt et al. 2010).

### ***Other organizational factors***

Often overlooked in research on preventing sexual harassment in higher education are different organizational factors. Instead, there is a strong focus on individual experiences and procedures for case management. In the larger field of gender and organizations, the structural, institutional, and relational aspects of organizations are of course addressed as

key aspects of transforming practices in different respects (Acker 1990, 2006). But there are quite few research publications on sexual harassment in higher education suggesting organizational structures are pivotal for preventing sexual harassment. One reason for this seems to be the fact that research on sexual harassment more broadly has largely developed separately and not in parallel with other related research fields (Lee 2018; Mueller, De Coster, and Estes 2001). Compensating for this relative lack of research resources, we complemented the review by taking part of adjacent research on organizational perspectives on preventing sexual harassment in large organizations with similarities to the higher education sector. Summing up these research studies, certain organization-specific features are of strong relevance for prevention, of which some of the more pronounced are:

- passive leadership increases the risk for both male and female employees of being subjected to sexual harassment, while clear and active leadership which demonstrates that sexual harassment will not be tolerated prevents sexual harassment (Lee 2018; Offermann, Malamut, and Murphy 2002; Settles et al. 2006),
- structural characteristics of organizations that are expected to produce increased job satisfaction and engagement also reduce the incidence of sexual harassment (Ollo-López and Nuñez 2018; Timmerman and Bajema 2000),
- the type of contract that employees work under is related to their risk of being subjected to sexual harassment, where more secure jobs result in a reduced risk of victimization (Hennekam and Bennett 2017; Mueller, De Coster, and Estes 2001),
- well-integrated, structurally egalitarian workplaces where women and men share power and leadership equally prevents sexual harassment; women in male-dominated workplaces are at greater risk of sexual harassment (Cogin and Fish 2007; also cf. Buchanan et al. 2014), and
- efforts to recruit, retain and promote women prevents sexual harassment (Kabat-Farr, Cortina, and Kovera 2014).

Finally, the aspect of bystanders (individuals witnessing sexual harassment, not/intervening as incidents occur and/or potential perpetrators) is also an important feature among organizational factors relevant for prevention of sexual harassment in higher education. The likelihood of taking action and intervening as a bystander when sexual harassment occurs is based on gender, sexuality, social class and perceived similarity in terms of position within the organization (Dessel, Goodman, and Woodford 2017). The importance of bystanders are, according to evidence-based longitudinal studies, crucial in preventive work and systematic bystander programmes can evidently decrease the prevalence of sexual harassment in higher education (Coker, Cook-Craig, and Williams 2011; Coker et al. 2015, 2016). The demands on, or expectations of, bystanders should be systematically included in the formulation of policies and different training efforts (McDonald, Charlesworth, and Graham 2015, 2016). Perhaps the most important aspect of bystander research is the acknowledged view on what is at stake when *not* addressing bystanders in preventive work on sexual harassment. The absence of efforts targeting individuals who belong to the majority culture can itself create a situation that normalizes sexual harassment (Bowes-Sperry and O'Leary-Kelly 2005).



## Research

Research on sexual harassment in higher education has several challenges concerning inadequate definitions, samples, survey methods and underreporting. Generally, quantitative cross-sectional studies on prevalence dominate the international research field but often lack coherent theoretical perspectives. Instead, research is foremost conducted based on national legal definitions of sexual harassment. A majority of peer-reviewed articles are published in English, use empirical data from USA and, to a certain extent, other English-speaking countries. More than half of the top-ranked peer-reviewed articles are based on limited and uncontrolled cross-sectional data, lack randomized samples and, to some extent, have inadequate statistical analysis. Research is often characterized by context-specific empirical studies, inadequate theorization of research questions and methodology, mainly juridical conceptualizations of sexual harassment, and a simplistic, binary understanding of gender as such. As a contrast to the research field in general, some of the recent qualitative studies are based on feminist theories on violence, feminist sociology, gender studies and organizational theory. In research on prevention, though, this is not the case as the link to knowledge about violence in general and violence prevention in particular is weak. As in much of the research field in general, the perspective of the perpetrator is absent also in research on prevention. Research on bystander intervention programmes is a relatively new field of relevance for developing systematic preventive efforts.

In sum, some main recommendations for future research are:

- There is a need to reinforce the methodological quality of quantitative research on sexual harassment in higher education, in particular using random sampling, control groups, longitudinal cohorts and longer follow-up periods (Anderson and Whiston 2005; McDonald 2012).
- Standardized definitions of different types of sexual harassment and sexual violence may facilitate the understanding of prevalence and differences in prevalence and the design of suitable preventive measures (Fedina, Holmes, and Backes 2018).
- A broader global representation in research on sexual harassment in higher education is recommended, especially research from non-English-speaking parts of the world, comparative studies of different countries, and development of inter-cultural research projects involving different regions (Henning et al. 2017; McDonald 2012; Willness, Steel, and Lee 2007).
- The focus of future research should be more on preventive work and the effects of preventive measures. A critical factor for developing preventive strategies is studying the underlying processes of sexual harassment, including the characteristics and incentives of perpetrators (Anderson and Whiston 2005; Vladutiu, Martin, and Macy 2011; Voth Schrag 2017).
- Intersectional perspectives that include experiences of minority groups are recommended, both in relation to assessing the effectiveness of preventive measures and in relation to prevalence. It also relates to questions of methodology, where more attention should be paid to ensuring the selection for studies of sexual harassment and sexual violence corresponds to the diversity that exists within higher education institutions (Anderson and Whiston 2005; Fedina, Holmes, and Backes 2018; Voth Schrag 2017).



## Discussion

In this section, we start out from the content of the above presentation of results and focus on discussing broader aspects of the research field as such, especially the use of concepts, if there is an ongoing ‘scientification’ of experiences of sexual harassment, and finally the idea of developing preventive measures.

When examining the development of concepts and theoretical investments over time in the research field as a whole, it is striking how a gradual reduction of the distance between emerging legal definitions and the scientific definitions is occurring. This is seen as a desirable development, but foremost it is an indirect effect. The latter means, in short, that the research-based approaches, by gradually subordinating themselves to legal demands for ‘usefulness’ and other realistic demands, become ever more repetitive instead of being explorative, constructive, challenging and curiously asking. Of course, this is what primarily characterizes the initial and often expansive phase of a scientific field; it is an expression of well-known principles for how scientific fields establish a normative legitimacy for a specific view of knowledge (Kuhn 1962).

Another tendency seen over time is a wish to establish a common understanding of sexual harassment. This applies in particular the ambition to reach a consensus around a common concept definition of sexual harassment, irrespective of situation, form of exposure, national context, and so forth. This is done primarily by producing, testing and developing various models, tests and scales. In particular, the emergence and importance of the SEQ test for the discourse in USA could be worth an analytical section itself (cf. Gutek, Murphy, and Douma 2004). What is striking to follow is how normative scales emerge and become established, with a strong leaning towards several traditional constituents of a positivistic epistemology. This develops into a ‘contest’ in the intersection between feminist theory, claiming the need for critical perspectives on power and violence on the one hand, and the wish to claim legitimacy through practices within a discourse of normal science (objectivity) to give sexual harassment validity on the other. This tendency is particularly expressed in research articles published during 1985 and 1995.

Because of this development, the increasingly established idea during the 1990s of testing how subjects *relate to understandings* of harassing situations, rather than *asking about actual exposure*, is a way of challenging the stability of notions of sexual harassment. By shifting the ambition to ‘scientific’ the multi-faceted, lived experiences into a conceptual homogenous object that can be manipulated and measured, the latter has achieved a gradual ‘de-radicalisation’ of discourses on violence and exposure. When fully relevant criticism of cross-sectional studies and non-parametric tests on non-randomized samples are put forward, this can thus just as well be read as a science theory battle, where the conditions themselves are seldom in the limelight.

At the same time, the top-ranked peer-reviewed articles from the last few years can be read as a counter-movement, or a recapture of multi-disciplinary and theory-driven research into exposure, that gains renewed attention through several different strategies in the research field. The broadening of exposure from dating violence and sexual assault on campus between heterosexual students into sexuality and race/ethnicity/skin colour, online exposure and in other arenas is taking place in parallel, but are also actual components of various analyses, in the selection of respondents, in a theoretical

pre-understanding of the diversity of exposure. Apparently, these concepts and approaches are gaining ground in the research field.

When it comes to the issue of preventive measures against sexual harassment in higher education, it seems as if the current paths for reducing prevalence and offering victims reparation lack research-based support. What has been done to prevent sexual harassment in higher education to this point has not been sufficient, nor effective, and too much centred on the individual and without follow-up or research-based evaluation. Preventive efforts in the future need to look beyond narrow legal and bureaucratic understandings of sexual harassment in order to build resilient organizations through experience-based knowledge of both practitioners in the field and victims to sexual harassment. It is time to turn from unavailing policies to actual reparative measures, from occasional training sessions to bystander intervention programmes, from case management to actually targeting perpetrators with sanctions.

Foremost, what is at stake is a shift in perspective on what constitutes the problem of sexual harassment as such, otherwise preventive measures will continue on the current path of reiterating policies and training. Sexual harassment is a phenomenon made legitimate and normalized through several different processes of neutralization (Husu 2001) and are in fact made possible through precarious working conditions, higher education being organized hierarchically, a lack of active leadership, the ongoing favorization of toxic academic masculinities, biased and unjust competition for research funding, and a societal normalization of gender-based violence. Therefore, the solutions to sexual harassment in higher education is not more of the same; it rather implies restructuring working conditions in higher education, challenging toxic academic masculine cultures, deciding on bold economic and social reforms counteracting intersectional inequalities, and not the least strong incentives in all parts of society combatting men's violence against women.

## Conclusions

Through comprehensive, systematic literature searches and summaries of existing research and brief analytical samples, a picture has been drawn of a very urgent research field as well as a major and diversified area of important knowledge. This systematic review tries to embody a problem that in its form, content and consequences constitute one of the major challenges to an inclusive work and study environment in higher education. This is a problem that also shines a light on the need for developing new and innovative preventive methods and relevant support structures, reliable measuring methods and relevant theoretical perspectives, as well as the importance of refined and changed legislation and legal practice. It is also a problem that clearly reflects academic culture as a dysfunctional, hierarchical structure and the inability of every current higher education system to address its own shortcomings.

The published research evidence suggests that prevalence of sexual harassment among students is reported by on average one out of four female students, but when adding exposure to other forms of sexual violence the numbers double. There are multiple and severe consequences of sexual harassment to individuals, but the effects on quality in research and education are not addressed. The supposed effects of major preventive measures has not been evaluated in research and as research often explores quantitative, juridical and individual aspects of sexual harassment in higher education, there is a

continuous lack of qualitative and intersectional approaches and perspectives. These aspects definitively call for strategic and targeted research funding initiatives.

For a long time, sexual harassment was a problem without name (MacKinnon 1979). Today, after decades of research, a multiplicity of concepts and theories, policies and preventive practices, and experience-based knowledge is growing and is continuously refined. Overall, sexual harassment is a named and framed problem on which we know quite a lot, although there still are several research questions to pursue. This research review is a contribution to what must be a joint striving to expunge sexual harassment in higher education specifically and sexualized violence more generally. We do believe critical knowledge is a prerequisite for change, and hope asking for ‘the impossible in order to obtain the possible is not always counterproductive’ (Arendt 1969, 79).

## Note

1. KvinnSam is the national resource library for gender studies in Sweden ([www.ub.gu.se/kvinn/](http://www.ub.gu.se/kvinn/)), which manages the women’s history collections and a literature database with gender science references from the collection of the University of Gothenburg Library.

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