

The Surprising Decline of Workplace Sexual Harassment Incidence in the U.S. Federal Workforce

Michael J. Rosenfeld

Stanford University

Abstract: U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (USMSPB) surveys document a decline of more than 50 percent between 1987 and 2016 in the percentage of women working for the federal government who have been sexually harassed (narrowly or broadly defined) in the prior two years. This decline has been underappreciated due to the infrequency of USMSPB surveys and the delayed release of the USMSPB report based on the 2016 survey. The decline in workplace sexual harassment of women has taken place across all federal agencies and at all workplace gender balances. While, in 1987, there was a strong positive correlation between male predominance in the workplace and women's report of sexual harassment, this association was greatly diminished by 2016. The formerly substantial gender divide in attitudes toward sexual harassment was also mostly diminished by 2016. By extrapolating the USMSPB surveys of federal workers to the entire U.S. workforce, I estimate that 4.8 million U.S. women were harassed at work in 2016 (using a narrow definition of harassment) and 7.6 million U.S. women were harassed at work in 1987 when the female workforce was substantially smaller. More than 700 women were sexually harassed at work in the United States in 2016 for every sexual harassment complaint filed with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. The observed decline in sexual harassment has implications for theories about law and social change.

Keywords: sexual harassment; social change; women's movement; workplace discrimination; survey data

Reproducibility Package: All original data, codes, and analysis are available at OpenICPSR, <https://doi.org/10.3886/E209051V1>.

Citation: Rosenfeld, J. Michael. 2024. "The Surprising Decline of Workplace Sexual Harassment Incidence in the U.S. Federal Workforce" *Sociological Science* 11: 934-964.


Received: July 24, 2024

Accepted: September 13, 2024

Published: October 7, 2024

Editor(s): Ari Adut, Kristen Schilt

DOI: 10.15195/v11.a34

Copyright: © 2024 The Author(s). This open-access article has been published under a Creative Commons Attribution License, which allows unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction, in any form, as long as the original author and source have been credited. 

ALTHOUGH the literature on workplace sexual harassment in the United States is vast, much of the literature has assumed that workplace sexual harassment incidence was unresponsive to organizational policies such as anti-harassment guidelines and grievance procedures. The theory of legal endogeneity (Edelman 1992, 2016; Edelman, Uggen, and Erlanger 1999) posits that organizations have adopted symbolic responses to anti-discrimination law in the United States. Legal endogeneity theory explains how organizational anti-harassment policies can fail to reduce sexual harassment, but the effectiveness of anti-harassment policies in reducing sexual harassment has been difficult to quantify because of a lack of data on the actual incidence rate of workplace sexual harassment.

Grossman (2003:3) argued, consistent with the theory of legal endogeneity, that "While courts have developed a comprehensive set of legal rules governing workplace harassment, the incidence of harassment has not changed." Would Grossman's claim be true today? Is it really possible that in the 60 years since the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the almost 40 years since *Meritor v. Vinson*, the incidence of sexual harassment at work in the US has in fact not changed? An unchangeable

rate of workplace sexual harassment would be an indictment of the lack of lasting impact of second wave feminism, would raise doubts about the impacts of social movements in general, and should lead to questions about the value of the rule of law itself.

The problem in understanding the influence of anti-harassment policy post-1964 is a data problem. The actual incidence rate (per year or per specific time period) of workplace sexual harassment experienced by women in the United States has been difficult to determine because we lack consistent repeated measures of nationally representative data for specific kinds of workplace sexual harassment behaviors.

Measuring Sexual Harassment

Although we lack nationally representative data on the incidence rate of workplace sexual harassment of women in the United States over time, there are proxy measures. The U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (USMSPB) 2016 and 2021 surveys of federal workers' experiences with workplace sexual harassment provide the opportunity to understand long-term changes in workplace sexual harassment incidence compared with earlier USMSPB 1980, 1987, and 1994 surveys. The USMSPB report on their 2016 survey was delayed for years due to a lack of a quorum at the USMSPB (U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board 2022b:41), so the 2016 and 2021 USMSPB data have not yet had the scholarly impact they deserve. I examine all five waves of the USMSPB surveys, but for reasons discussed below, I focus on the changes between 1987 and 2016.

Sexual harassment incidence is famously difficult to quantify because definitions of sexual harassment vary so widely, and individuals' own determinations of whether certain behavior qualifies as harassment can change over time (U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board 1988). Furthermore, what individuals understand as sexual harassment might not match the enforceable legal definition of sexual harassment.

Societal definitions change over time as to what kinds of flirtatious or sexualized behaviors are appropriate in a work environment and what behaviors cross the line into harassment. Berebitsky (2012) noted that some of the sexualized office behavior that Brown ([1964] 2004) described as lighthearted fun in an earlier 1964 era, such as men chasing female coworkers down halls to strip them of their underwear, male bosses making meetings with female subordinates on false pretenses, and a steady stream of propositions for dates even after initial rejections, fit more squarely into definitions of sexual harassment today.

In their meta-analysis of studies on work-related sexual harassment in the United States, Ilies et al. (2003) found that women's reports of sexual harassment seemed to be *increasing* over time (or across research publication dates), but they noted that the studies in their meta-analysis were not consistent in their definitions of sexual harassment. Furthermore, the studies in Ilies et al.'s meta-analysis had incidence rates calculated on different (and some on indeterminate) time horizons. Frank et al. (2024) found a decrease in sexual harassment experienced by medical interns in the United States across three cohorts from 2016 to 2022.

Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC)-filed claims of sexual harassment declined 40 percent from 1997 to 2017 (Cassino and Besen-Cassino 2019), but the selectivity into filing formal claims is unknown. Sexual harassment complaints filed with the U.S. EEOC number fewer than 10,000 per year recently (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission 2022) or on the order of 15,000 per year between 1997 and 2006. The great majority of sexual harassment goes unreported so the number of filed complaints is not a good measure of the incidence of sexual harassment events (Feldblum and Lipnic 2016).

The General Social Survey (GSS) asked a question about lifetime experience of workplace sexual harassment (variable “sexhar”), which showed a small and insignificant decline from 42.3 percent in 1994 to 38.9 percent in 1996. Given the modest sample size of the GSS and the two-year time span between surveys, it is not surprising that no significant change was observed in the GSS data. Without reasonably consistent measures of sexual harassment from large nationally representative samples spread out over time, the trend over time in sexual harassment in the United States is difficult or impossible to identify.

In addition to problems defining sexual harassment and operationalizing those definitions into surveys, there is a fundamental problem of comparing survey questions about sexual harassment experiences that do not have an explicit time frame (Arvey and Cavanaugh 1995). Most literature on sexual harassment relies on survey questions, such as GSS “sexhar,” which ask “has this ever happened to you...” producing answers that cannot be converted into yearly incidence.¹ I derive estimates of yearly and biannual incidence of workplace sexual harassment from the 1980 to 2021 waves of USMSPB studies, which asked federal workers about specific workplace harassment experiences within the prior two years.

Workplace Sexual Harassment, the Law, and the Roots of Our Lack of Data about Harassment

The history of sexual harassment law begins with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, whose Title VII forbade workplace discrimination because of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. The term “sexual harassment” was introduced by women at Cornell University in 1975 (Baker 2008). Feminist activist and legal scholar MacKinnon (1979) argued in her book *The Sexual Harassment of Women* that workplace sexual harassment of women should be treated as a violation of Title VII.

Activists Backhouse and Cohen (1978:185–6) argued that employers needed to have strong anti-harassment policies, including education of workers to understand the policies and (crucially) surveys of workers to understand the actual prevalence of sexually harassing behaviors. In 1980, in the waning days of the Carter administration, the EEOC (a creation of Title VII) issued a set of guidelines into the Code of Federal Regulations that defined workplace sexual harassment as a violation of Title VII as MacKinnon, Backhouse, and Cohen had advocated for, and incorporated many of the advocates’ suggestions for responsible employer policy.² The 1980 EEOC guidelines included employer responsibility for the acts of supervisors and general liability for employee harassment where the employer knew or should have known about the harassment. The 1980 EEOC guidelines

recommended education of workers about their rights to be free of sexual harassment, but (contra the advocacy of Backhouse and Cohen) EEOC guidelines did not require or even recommend that organizations survey their workers for evidence of sexual harassment incidence.

A few years later, MacKinnon's client Mechelle Vinson won a landmark victory at the U.S. Supreme Court in *Meritor v. Vinson* (1986) whose majority decision built on EEOC guidelines and made key aspects of EEOC guidelines into legal precedent across the United States making employers civilly liable, under Title VII, for sexual harassment that took place on their premises.³

Two 1998 Supreme Court cases further clarified what companies had to do to avoid civil liability for sexual harassment committed by their workers. These cases were *Burlington Industries v. Ellerth* and *Faragher v. City of Boca Raton*. For the *Ellerth* majority, Justice Kennedy wrote, "Title VII is designed to encourage the creation of antiharassment policies and effective grievance mechanisms" (1998, p. 764). As Edelman (2016) has described in detail, employers after 1998 rushed to add anti-harassment policies and grievance mechanisms as shields against liability.

Neither the *Ellerth* nor the *Faragher* decisions made any mention of requiring employers to survey their employees about harassment incidence. Epp (2009: 256–9) showed that only 6.7 percent of city governments had a program to survey employees about sexual harassment incidence, whereas 98 percent of cities had written anti-harassment policies and 74 percent had programs of ongoing training to teach employees about the anti-harassment policies.

The general lack of readily available survey data on the actual incidence of workplace sexual harassment over time, as activists Backhouse and Cohen (1978) had called for leaves a key question unanswered: Do the required anti-harassment programs work to prevent sexual harassment or not?

Legalized Accountability: A Theory of Social Progress

There are two competing theories about social change in response to *Meritor*, *Ellerth*, and *Faragher*. The first theory is Epp's (2009) theory of legalized accountability. Legalized accountability theory starts with a vanguard feminist movement in the 1970s naming sexual harassment as a problem and calling on organizations to redress the problem, follows up with victories in the courts that made organizations potentially financially responsible for the tort of sexual harassment on their premises, and eventually led to bureaucratized change that educated workers to make sexual harassment at work less likely.

Although administrative workers tasked with overseeing anti-harassment work within organizations often had tenuous power or authority, they had outside allies: their own professional connections and the threat of discrimination lawsuits. When the Reagan administration turned federal policy against EEO enforcement, the professionalization of anti-harassment and diversity workers allowed them to rebrand their work and to remain in place (Kelly and Dobbin 1998). Groups with new and non-traditional views within an organization can start out being marginalized and eventually (with external support) become powerful enough to sway organizational policy in new directions (Espeland 1998).

In Epp's (2009) view, the movement to reduce sexual harassment was a triumph of legalized accountability, but there is an evidentiary limitation in Epp's argument. Epp was taking at face value the administrators' words (and the views expressed in their professional journals) for the effectiveness of their anti-harassment programs. Epp did not have access to survey data about the actual incidence of workplace sexual harassment over time, and as Epp notes, most organizations did not gather data on workplace sexual harassment incidence.

The progressive version of social change posited in the theory of legalized accountability is analogous to the realized progress in public opinion and in legal rights for gay people in the United States (Ball 2014, 2019; Cathcart and Gabel-Brett 2016; Eskridge 2008; Rosenfeld 2021), culminating in marriage equality as a result of *Obergefell v Hodges* (2015). Similar to the movement against sexual harassment, the Gay Rights movement also had roots in the radical vanguards of feminist and student activism of the 1960s and 1970s (D'Emilio 1998).

Ball (2019) has shown that U.S. corporations in the 1990s that had previously been hostile to gay rights adopted policies of allowing gay workers to put their same-sex partners on company health plans. The small and relatively low-cost concession of allowing gay workers to add same-sex partners to company health plans ended up having substantial influence on government policy to later expand rights for all gay citizens. Social change usually happens slowly and incrementally (Eskridge 2002).⁴ Even if the original motivations are self-serving or purely symbolic, concessions to minority rights can have powerful downstream effects.

Legal Endogeneity: A Theory of Social Inertia

The alternate to legalized accountability's theory of incremental social change is the theory of legal endogeneity (Edelman 1992, 2016; Edelman, Uggen and Erlanger 1999). According to legal endogeneity theory, in the aftermath of *Meritor*, *Ellerth*, and *Faragher*, organizations responded to the threat of sexual harassment lawsuits by creating symbolic anti-harassment policies. Organizations used the ambiguity of Title VII, the inherent difficulty in enforcing anti-discrimination laws, and the lack of specificity in court decisions to fashion their own endogenous views of what kinds of policies were necessary to limit their potential liability to sexual harassment lawsuits. Courts generally accepted the evidence of any kind of anti-harassment policy, well distributed and explained to workers, as evidence of corporate good faith. According to legal endogeneity theory, organizational policy to discourage or punish sexual harassment was mostly symbolic. However, Edelman (2016:5, 101) noted that symbolic policies are not *necessarily* ineffective.

Marshall (2005) presented a detailed case study of women in a university with an ostensibly excellent and flexible anti-sexual-harassment policy who nonetheless found their complaints of sexual harassment frustrated and blocked at nearly every turn. The university's anti-harassment policy was progressive and generous on paper but in actual practice the people who implemented the policy were (according to Marshall's research) strict and unforgiving, so that three quarters of women who had been sexually harassed according to Marshall's definition never initiated a grievance within the university system. Consistent with the theory of

legal endogeneity, Marshall found that the implementation of one university's anti-sexual-harassment policy did not seem to be working (and did not seem to be *intended* to work) to reduce sexual harassment on campus.

Organizational scholars use the term decoupling (Bromley and Powell 2012; Meyer and Rowan 1977) to describe what Marshall (2005) found on one campus and what the theory of legal endogeneity implies about anti-harassment programs in general. In a decoupled system, the anti-harassment program would be isolated within the organization so that it could exist without hindering the core aims of the organization. The lack of monitoring of outcomes is a classic symptom of organizational decoupling. Outcomes that are essential to an organization's survival must be monitored assiduously. Outcomes that an organization does not see as essential need not be monitored at all.

The tension between Epp's theory of legalized accountability and Edelman's theory of legal endogeneity can be resolved in part by whether the organizational policies ostensibly intended to reduce workplace sexual harassment *actually* reduced workplace sexual harassment, which is a fundamental data and demographic question. In other words, does survey evidence exist for the success of the anti-sexual-harassment policies encouraged by post-*Meritor* judicial precedents? To form the question more specifically: Has the incidence of sexual harassment of U.S. women at work declined since *Meritor*, *Faragher*, and *Ellerth*? Previous research has been inconclusive on this key question of the long-term trend in workplace sexual harassment incidence. My contribution to the literature is to use representative data to attempt to answer this key question.

The Anti-Sexual-Harassment Movement as a Displacing Social Movement

Gamson (1990)'s theory of social movement success distinguishes between displacing and nondisplacing movements. The movement against sexual harassment falls in the former category because anti-harassment training and enforcement are expensive undertakings and because a program against sexual harassment cannot be effective in the long term unless some harassers are eventually held to account. The goals of the anti-harassment movement necessarily displace the rights of the accused harassers and displace the privileges of the organizational structures in which the accused are embedded. Gamson (1990) found that movements with displacing goals were much less likely to succeed.

The movement to desegregate America's public schools is a classic example of a social and legal movement with displacing goals and a lack of clear success over time. Schools cannot be integrated without affecting the schooling of students in the racial majority and without raising taxes to pay for new buildings and more qualified teachers (Rosenfeld 2021:228). Scholars who study desegregation have tended to doubt the efficacy of court-mandated social change (Rosenberg 2008). Indices of school segregation reflect surprisingly little progress toward the goal of desegregation since *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 (Orfield, Eaton, and Harvard Project on School Desegregation 1996).

Scholarship on school segregation benefits from high quality data on school-by-school racial enrollment over time. In contrast, research on sexual harassment has been hampered by a lack of nationally representative data on the incidence (within a specific time frame) of workplace sexual harassment.

Gendered Theories of Sexual Harassment at Work

Research has shown that not all women are equally vulnerable to being sexually harassed at work. Gruber and Bjorn (1980) found that younger women, single women, divorced women, and women whose workplaces were predominantly male were more likely to have experienced sexual harassment. In work environments where men predominate numerically, a chauvinistic kind of male culture that tolerates the harassment of women may also predominate and this chauvinistic male culture may lead to more workplace sexual harassment of women (De Coster, Estes and Mueller 1999; McLaughlin, Uggen and Blackstone 2012).⁵ Gutek, Cohen and Konrad (1990) refer to the higher rate of sexual harassment of women in male-dominated work spaces as the “gender hypothesis.” The numerical preponderance of men in science and engineering is one reason that has been proposed for the high reported prevalence of sexual harassment of women in those fields (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2018).

Feminist activists took up the fight against workplace sexual harassment in the 1970s (Backhouse and Cohen 1978; Baker 2008; MacKinnon 1979) in part because many men in positions of authority were blind to the importance and prevalence of workplace sexual harassment. Women had painful experiences of sexual harassment that most men in authority had the privilege of not having to know or care about.

The gender gap in understanding sexual harassment has been documented in past data (Tinkler 2008; see also Fig. 4 below) and this gender gap undoubtedly has contributed to organizational cultures that tolerate sexual harassment. If Epp’s theory of legalized accountability is correct, and if years of organizational training around sexual harassment have been effective at conveying clear definitions of what constitutes sexual harassment to both men and women, we should see a narrowing of the gender gap in perceptions of which behaviors constitute sexual harassment.

Hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Consistent with Epp’s theory of legalized accountability, the incidence rate of workplace sexual harassment will have declined since the 1980s.

A decline in sexual harassment incidence over time could be a variable decline (with some organizations seeing no change at all and others seeing sharp declines), or the decline could be broad, across nearly all organizations.

Corollary 1: If sexual harassment incidence has declined broadly, decline in harassment incidence has been broad across types of harassing behaviors and across different kinds of workplaces.

Corollary 2: If the decline in workplace sexual harassment has been broad, this implies a fundamental change in male culture vis-à-vis the treatment of women at work. In such a changed environment, the strong association between male predominance in the workplace and workplace sexual harassment will be substantially diminished.

Corollary 3: In a broad decline of workplace sexual harassment, we expect to find a decline in the gender gap in attitudes about what constitutes sexual harassment.

Hypothesis 2: Counter-Hypothesis: Consistent with Edelman's theory of legal endogeneity, the incidence rate of sexual harassment will have remained steady since the 1980s.

To be clear, legal endogeneity theory does not rule out the possibility that some organizational policies *might* reduce sexual harassment and workplace discrimination (Edelman 2016, p. 164), as ancillary consequences of the main goal of reducing organizational liability. However, legal endogeneity theory is consistent with a world in which the average prevalence of sexual harassment remains constant over time despite steady expansion of anti-harassment policies (Grossman 2003).⁶

Data and Methods

USMSPB has conducted a series of stratified random surveys of federal employees. USMSPB 1980 had 20,083 federal worker subjects (10,648 women) and a response rate of 85 percent. USMSPB 1987 had 8,523 federal worker subjects (4,385 women) and an approximate response rate of 66 percent. USMSPB 1994 had 8,081 federal worker subjects (4,259 women). USMSPB 2016 had 14,515 federal worker subjects and a response rate of 38.8 percent. USMSPB 2021 had 33,139 federal worker subjects (12,427 women) and a response rate of 33.3 percent. USMSPB 1980, 1987, and 1994 were mail surveys, whereas USMSPB 2016 and 2021 were online surveys. The 1980, 1987, and 1994 survey data sets and documentation are distributed by the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR; U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board 1997). The 2016 and 2021 survey data sets and documentation are distributed by USMSPB (U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board 2022a). I have produced a replication package for the tables and figures in this article including code, output, and data available at OpenICPSR (Rosenfeld 2024).

I limit the analysis of sexual harassment to answers provided by women respondents (as is typical in this literature, see McLaughlin, Uggen and Blackstone 2017). Women respondents in the USMSPB data experience workplace sexual harassment at a rate of about three times higher than men.

The USMSPB 1987 survey asked subjects a series of questions about "uninvited and unwanted" sexual harassment experience in the past 24 months: (1) "actual or attempted rape or assault," (2) "unwanted pressure for sexual favors," (3) "unwanted deliberate touching, leaning over, cornering, or pinching," (4) "unwanted pressure for dates," (5) "unwanted letters, telephone calls, or materials of a sexual nature," (6) "unwanted sexual looks or gestures," and (7) "unwanted sexual teasing, jokes, remarks, or questions." I construe sexual harassment as a dichotomous

outcome contrasting one or more positive answers to items 1–5 (a narrow measure) or all items 1–7 (a broader measure) with subjects who answered negatively to all harassment categories. The USMSPB surveys were all anonymous and confidential, so survey subjects had no reason to fear that their individual answers would be known to their employers.

The narrow measure of sexual harassment includes the more serious kinds of sexual harassment based on the empirical gradient of USMSPB survey subjects' views of which behaviors most definitely constitute sexual harassment (see Fig. 4). I follow the USMSPB's own distinction (U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board 1981: 15–16) between more serious and less serious forms of sexual harassment based on their 1980 survey, except that I place pressure for dates on the serious side of the arbitrary line demarcating the border between "serious" and "less serious," whereas the USMSPB placed pressure for dates on the "less serious" side. The EEOC (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission 2024) recognizes pervasiveness of conduct and severity of conduct as two parts of the definition of sexual harassment.⁷ It is important for definitions of sexual harassment to distinguish between different behaviors by their potential severity (Arvey and Cavanaugh 1995).

The USMSPB 2016 and 2021 surveys asked questions similar to USMSPB 1987, but the wording in the "pressure for dates" and "pressure for sexual favors" questions left out the "unwanted" prefix that had been present in 1987 (see Appendix Fig. A1 in the online supplement). The USMSPB 2016 question that was closest to 1987's "unwanted deliberate touching, leaning over, cornering or pinching," was "unwelcome invasion of personal space (e.g., touching, crowding, leaning over)." USMSPB 2016 had questions about additional categories of harassment (including stalking). For the purpose of comparability, I limit the 2016 harassment categories to those that were also asked about in 1987.

In addition to asking subjects about their experiences of being subjected to sexual harassment, the 1980–2016 USMSPB public data included questions about whether subjects considered the same behaviors (except for rape and assault) to be sexual harassment, with possible answers from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" in 2016 or "definitely yes" to "definitely not" in 1980–1994. In the 1980–1994 surveys, the questions were asked separately for "if a supervisor did this" and "if another worker did this." In the 2016 USMSPB survey, the questions about sexual harassment attitudes simply mentioned "in the workplace."

Of the five USMSPB surveys (1980, 1987, 1994, 2016, and 2021), I focus primarily on the 1987 and 2016 survey years. The 1994 survey had less-than-ideal question formatting of the sexual harassment experience questions (see Appendix Fig. A1 in the online supplement). The 2021 USMSPB survey was fielded (online) during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic caused much work to be done remotely, which reduced workers' face-to-face interactions and certainly could have affected the rate of workplace sexual harassment. Given the extenuating circumstances of the pandemic (affecting the 2021 survey) and the potential question formatting issue with the 1994 data, I use all the years of data but I focus especially on the 1987 and 2016 surveys.

The different USMSPB surveys had different modules and different formatting on the page (or for 2016 and 2021, on the web) (see Fig. A1 in the online supplement

for examples). Of note, of the five surveys, only 2016 had the words “sexual harassment” visible on the top of the page where questions about experience of sexually harassing behaviors were presented. Whether the visible presence of the words “sexual harassment” had any prompting effect on the behavior-specific experiential questions in 2016 is unknown.

Fitzgerald (1993) described the USMSPB surveys as the most important U.S. data source on workplace sexual harassment incidence. The USMSPB data reflect women’s specific experience with workplace sexual harassment events (the most useful type of survey of harassment according to Ilies et al. [2003]). According to Ilies et al. (2003), the experiential survey method used in USMSPB (asking questions specific to particular sexual harassment behaviors) has advantages over the direct query method, which asks women to have in mind a definition of sexual harassment and apply their own definition to their experiences. The direct query method was used in the American Working Conditions Survey (Maestas et al. 2017) and the Pew survey (Pew Research Center 2018).

To my knowledge, no prior literature has used the USMSPB data the way I do in this article: to apply the women federal workers’ rate of experiences of sexual harassment from USMSPB data to the entire U.S. working population of women to estimate the number of women in the U.S. sexually harassed at work in a given year. Ilies et al. (2003:611) noted that “the literature on sexual harassment lacks national-level estimates of the actual prevalence of sexual harassment,” and to my knowledge this lack of national-level estimates has remained a fundamental limitation to research on sexual harassment.

Despite the lack of nationally representative data on sexual harassment (specific experience rather than direct query) per year incidence for the whole U.S. workforce, there are reasons to believe that the rate of sexual harassment in the federal workforce has been similar to or moderately less than the incidence of sexual harassment in the non-federal workforce. First, the U.S. federal workforce is enormous and the industries involved in federal work are diverse, from the Air Force to the Environmental Protection Agency to the Department of the Treasury. Second, the 1987 USMSPB asked federal workers who had worked in federal and non-federal environments to compare the frequency of sexual harassment in both environments. Sixty-five percent of women thought that the sexual harassment environment was the same in federal and non-federal workplaces, 23 percent thought there was more sexual harassment in non-federal employment, and 12 percent thought there was more sexual harassment in federal employment. Third, Ilies et al.’s (2003:622) meta-analysis showed that the lifetime experience of workplace sexual harassment in U.S. government samples (46 percent) and U.S. private sector samples (43 percent) was similar and statistically indistinguishable.

For census data on the number of women in the active labor force, I rely on U.S. Census, American Community Survey data, and the March 1987 Current Population Survey via IPUMS (Ruggles et al. 2023). The number of women at work includes only women employed for wage or salary and are “at work” (excluding the self-employed, the unemployed, and those who were employed but were on leave), because the at-work, wage and salary earning population is the population at risk for workplace sexual harassment.

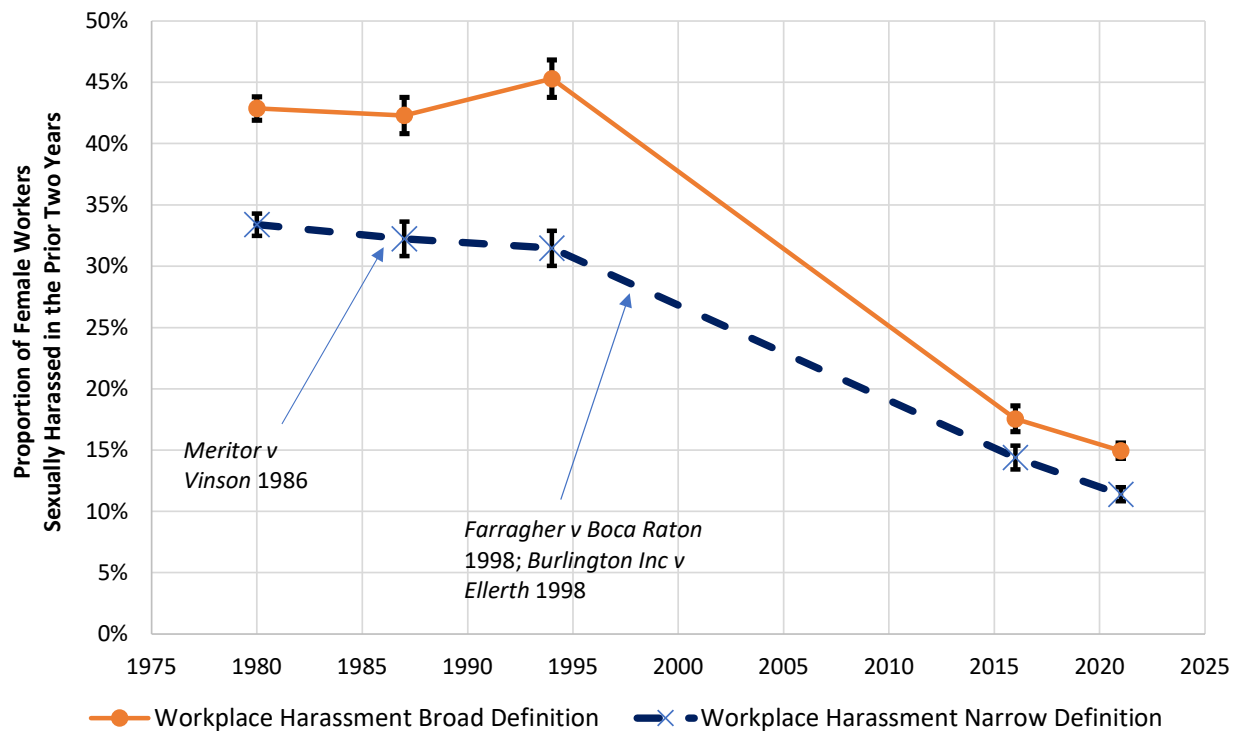


Figure 1: Decline in sexual harassment of women working for the U.S. Federal Government, with 95 percent confidence intervals. Source: Weighted USMSPB data 1980, 1987, 1994, 2016, and 2021. Narrow definition of sexual harassment includes (1) rape and assault, (2) unwanted touching, (3) pressure for dates, (4) pressure for sexual favors, and (5) sexually explicit communication. Broad definition adds (6) suggestive looks and (7) sexual teasing.

Results

The Raw Decline in Sexual Harassment of Women

Figure 1 shows the raw decline in workplace sexual harassment experienced by women working for different agencies of the U.S. federal government after 1994, by both the narrow and broad definitions of sexual harassment. In 1987, 32.2 percent of women experienced at least one of sexual assault (which was rare), pressure for dates, unwanted touching, sexual communications, and pressure for sexual favors at work in the prior two years. In 2016, by the same narrow definition of sexual harassment, 14.4 percent of women experienced the same kinds of sexual harassment in the prior two years. The drop in workplace sexual harassment from 1987 to 2016 is a highly significant and socially important drop of 55.4 percent (see also Table 1). The 95 percent confidence intervals are shown in Figure 1 but are extremely narrow because the USMSPB surveys have had moderately large samples.

Federal employee women's reports of sexual harassment fell even further by the 2021 survey. The decline in the broad definition of sexual harassment was even greater than the decline in the narrow definition of sexual harassment, a highly

Table 1: Percent of women experiencing different kinds of sexual harassment in the prior two years 1987 and 2016

	1987 (%)	2016 (%)	Percentage change	Significance
(1) Rape/assault	0.8	0.5	−38.3	
(2) Pressure for sexual favors	8.7	1.4	−84.4	†
(3) Deliberate touching	26.1	12.3	−53.0	†
(4) Pressure for dates	14.7	2.5	−82.8	†
(5) Sexually suggestive communication	11.8	5.4	−53.9	†
Narrow definition of sexual harassment, includes at least one of the above five more severe behaviors	32.2	14.4	−55.4	†
(6) Suggestive looks	28.3	8.6	−69.8	†
(7) Sexually teasing remarks	34.8	9.4	−73.1	†
Wide definition of sexual harassment, includes at least one of seven categories	42.3	17.6	−58.5	†

Source: Weighted USMSPB data for women respondents reporting that each behavior occurred at least once in the past two years.

Note: Percentage change is calculated on the values before rounding.

† $p < 0.001$.

significant drop of 58.5 percent from 1987 to 2016. Figure 1 supports Hypothesis 1: there has been a strong and significant decline in workplace sexual harassment of women working for the federal government. The decline in workplace sexual harassment shown in Figure 1 is consistent with the decline in sexual harassment of medical interns in the United States across internship cohorts from 2016 to 2022 (Frank et al. 2024).

Figure 1 also illustrates why the apparent decline in workplace sexual harassment has been underreported and understudied: The USMSPB surveys were fielded at irregular intervals. Between the 1994 survey and the release of the 2016 survey data, a gap of more than 20 years, there was no indication from USMSPB surveys or any other source that a substantial decline in sexual harassment incidence had taken place. The 1980, 1987, and 1994 surveys showed unchanged or even increasing sexual harassment incidence (using the broad definition of harassment).

Table 1 shows that the decline in sexual harassment from 1987 to 2016 was consistent and highly statistically significant across six of the seven surveyed harassing behaviors and across both the narrow (five categories) and the broad (seven categories) definitions of sexual harassment. The rarest and most serious behavior, actual rape or sexual assault at work, was infrequent enough so that the sample size of events was small and the change in rate from 1987 to 2016 was not statistically significant. For all of the other categories of harassment, there was a sharp decline in incidence reported by women from 1987 to 2016, which supports both Hypothesis 1 and Corollary 1, indicating that the decline in sexual harassment would be broad

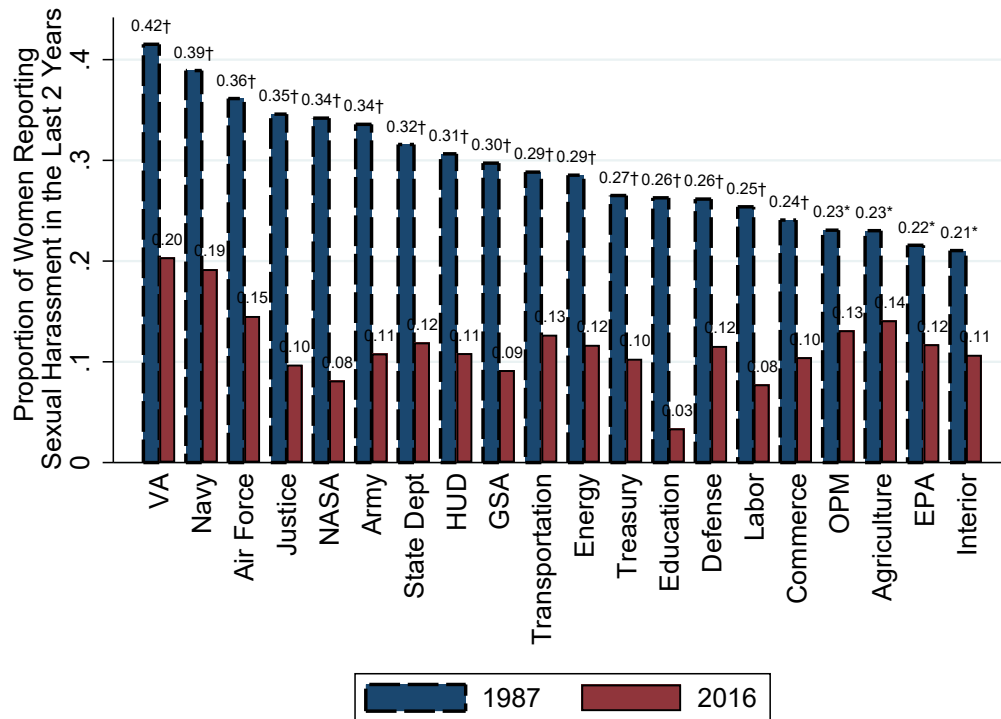


Figure 2: Broad decline in the incidence of sexual harassment of women (two-year time frame, narrow definition) across Federal Agencies. Source: Weighted USMSPB data from 1987 and 2016. Narrow definition of sexual harassment includes (1) rape and assault, (2) unwanted touching, (3) pressure for dates, (4) pressure for sexual favors, and (5) sexual communications. For comparisons of 1987 and 2016 rates, * $p < 0.05$; † $p < 0.001$.

across all types of sexual harassment. Pressure for sexual favors and pressure for dates led the way with declines of 84.4 percent and 82.8 percent, respectively.

The decline in the incidence rate of “pressure for sexual favors” and “pressure for dates” is all the more impressive because the 1987 version of the USMSPB survey defined those questions more narrowly by adding the prefix “unwanted.”⁸

Broad Decline in Sexual Harassment across Agencies

Figure 2 shows that the decline in sexual harassment (narrowly defined and over a two-year span) was consistent across federal agencies. For each of the 20 federal agencies whose workers were surveyed in 1987 and again in 2016, women’s report of sexual harassment was lower in 2016. For all of these 20 agencies, the declines were statistically significant. Some of the agencies had spectacular declines: In the army, women’s report of sexual harassment over a two-year span declined from 33.6 percent in 1987 to 10.8 percent in 2016. In the NASA, the decline was from 34.2 percent in 1987 to 8.1 percent in 2016. In the Department of Education, the decline was from 26.3 percent in 1987 to 3.4 percent in 2016. Other agencies such as Defense, Interior, Agriculture, and the Office of Personnel Management had rates of sexual harassment that were already lower than average in 1987 (the average was

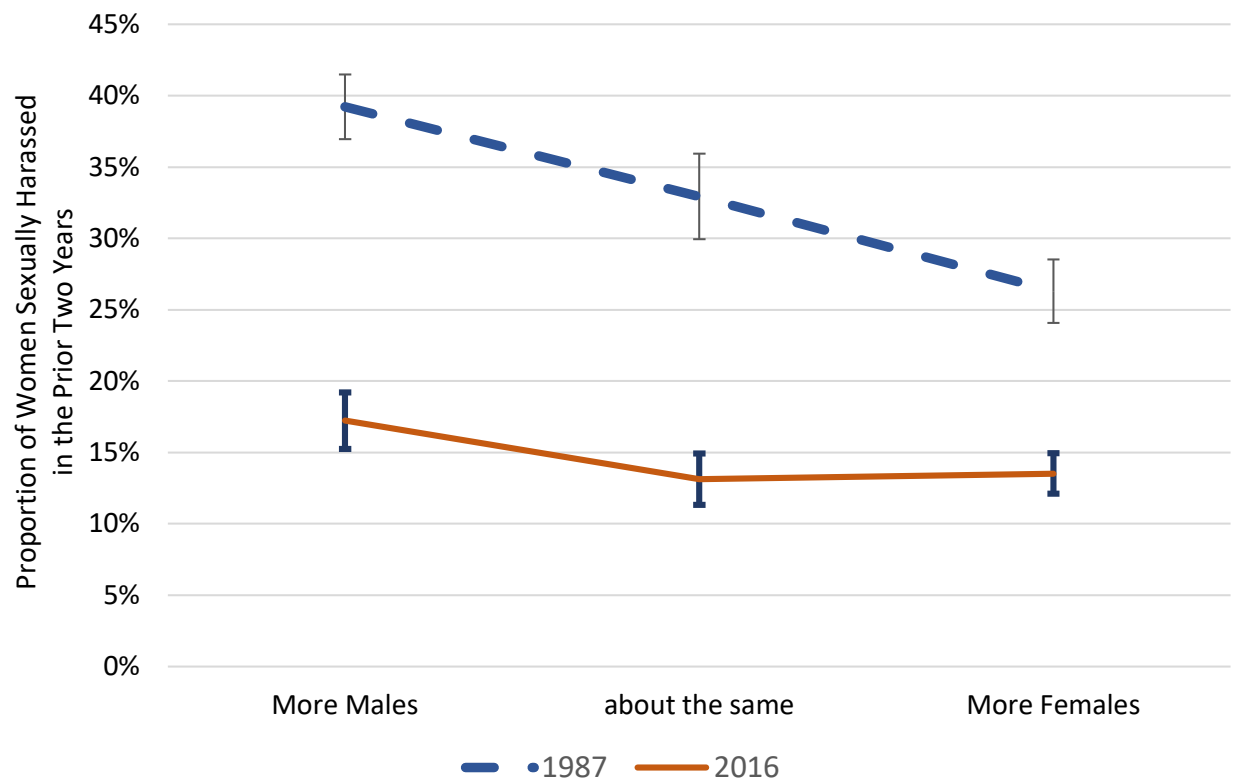


Figure 3: A diminished association between male predominance at work and workplace sexual harassment, with 95 percent confidence intervals. Source: Weighted USMSPB data from 1987 and 2016, using a narrow definition of sexual harassment. Narrow definition of sexual harassment includes (1) rape and assault, (2) unwanted touching, (3) pressure for dates, (4) pressure for sexual favors, and (5) sexual communication.

32.2 percent, see Table 1), and their women-reported levels of sexual harassment were nonetheless significantly lower in 2016 than they had been in 1987. Figure 2 supports Hypothesis 1 and Corollary 1, because the decline in sexual harassment has been broad across all federal agencies.

The Decline of Male Predominance in the Workplace as a Predictor of Sexual Harassment

The categories for gender balance of respondent's workplace were different in the 1987 and 2016 USMSPB surveys. The 1987 survey had outlier categories rarely selected of "all men" and "all women" workplaces, whereas the outlier categories in 2016 were "substantially more men" and "substantially more women."⁹ In Figure 3, I have combined categories so that there are three categories that are more consistent across surveys: respondent reports that their workplace is mostly male, mostly female, or "about the same number of males and females." The 1987 data show a highly significant slope and a monotonic relationship between male numerical preponderance at the workplace and higher rates of sexual harassment of women, consistent a broad prior literature (De Coster et al. 1999; Gruber and

Bjorn 1980; Gutek et al. 1990; Jackson and Newman 2004; McLaughlin et al. 2012). The 2016 data also show a significant association between male predominance in the workforce and women's experience of sexual harassment (Tinkler and Zhao 2020), but the slope of the association is significantly less steep in 2016 compared to 1987 (Z-score of the difference equal to 4.73) and there was no difference at all in 2016 (as there had been in 1987) in the rate of sexual harassment experienced by women in the mostly female workgroups and women in the gender balanced workgroups.

Table 2 uses all five gender balance categories in both 1987 and 2016 surveys with workplace gender balance empirically determined by the weighted number of men and women survey subjects who place themselves in each gender-workplace category. Table 2 shows that the association between male gender balance in the workplace and women's experience of sexual harassment was statistically significant in both 1987 and 2016, but the association was much stronger in 1987.

In the 1987 data, the best fit line shows that with each 10 percent increase in women's representation in the local workplace, the chance of women being sexually harassed at work (narrow definition) in a two-year period declined by 3.12 percentage points (model 1). In the 2016 data, because the relationship between male percentage at work and women's reports of harassment was flat except for the most-male workplaces, the best fit line showed that a 10 percent increase in women's representation in the local workplace yielded a decline of only 0.825 percentage points in women's reports of sexual harassment (narrowly defined) over a two-year period (see model 3). The difference in slopes between the two surveys was highly significant.¹⁰

Although the demographic background variables available in 1987 and 2016 USMSPB surveys were different, Table 2, models 2 and 4 show that women more than 40 years of age were much less likely to have been sexually harassed in both surveys (consistent with Gruber and Bjorn 1980) and that women with graduate degrees were more likely to have been sexually harassed (with more than six percentage points higher rate of victimization compared with women who did not go to college) in both surveys (De Coster et al. 1999). The 1987 data show that single and divorced women had higher rates of being sexually harassed at work compared with married women (consistent with De Coster et al. 1999; Gruber and Bjorn 1980). The 2016 data show that women who were doing any amount of telework were 3.6 percentage points less likely to be harassed at work.

Women team leaders in 2016 were significantly more likely to report being harassed. Combined with the result that women with graduate degrees were more likely to report harassment in 1987 and 2016, this supports a theory that women with authority or leadership of one kind or another are especially likely to be victims of sexual harassment at work (Tinkler and Zhao 2020).

None of the demographic controls available in either 1987 or 2016 had much mediating or moderating effect on the relationship between workplace gender balance and women's experience of sexual harassment. The partial decoupling of workplace gender balance and sexual harassment between 1987 and 2016 is consistent with Corollary 2 and demonstrates an unwinding or at least a moderation

Table 2: Workplace gender balance as a predictor of women's two-year sexual harassment experience (narrow definition) and ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions (SE)

Survey Year	1987	1987	2016	2016
Model	1	2	3	4
Proportion female at workplace (100% female compared to 0%)	-0.312 [†] (0.0388)	-0.292 [†] (0.038)	-0.0825 [†] (0.0249)	-0.0849* (0.025)
Age 16-19		-0.35* (0.12)		
20-24		-0.04 (0.04)		
25-34 (ref)				
35-44		-0.12 [†] (0.02)		
45-54		-0.20 [†] (0.02)		
55+		-0.27 [†] (0.03)		
40 and over (ref < 40)				-0.076 [†] (0.014)
Some college or BA (ref no college)		0.052* (0.015)		
Graduate degree (ref no college)		0.086* (0.036)		
AA or BA degree (ref < AA)				0.015 (0.013)
Graduate degree (ref < AA)				0.079 [†] (0.013)
Married (ref single)		-0.054* (0.019)		N/A
Divorced or separated		0.069 [†] (0.024)		N/A
Widowed		0.044 (0.043)		N/A
Supervisor (ref: non-supervisor)		-0.036 (0.026)		-0.018 (0.014)
Team leader (ref: non-supervisor)		N/A		0.064 [†] (0.013)
Any telework		N/A		-0.036 [†] (0.0098)
Constant	0.48	0.57	0.019	0.23
R ²	0.015	0.077	0.002	0.025
N	4,235	3,906	4,988	4,959

Source: Weighted data from USMSPB surveys 1987 and 2016. Narrow definition of sexual harassment includes (1) rape and assault, (2) unwanted touching, (3) pressure for dates, (4) pressure for sexual favors, and (5) sexual communications. Supervisor's gender, not significant, is not shown in model 2.

* $p < 0.05$; [†] $p < 0.001$, two-tailed tests.

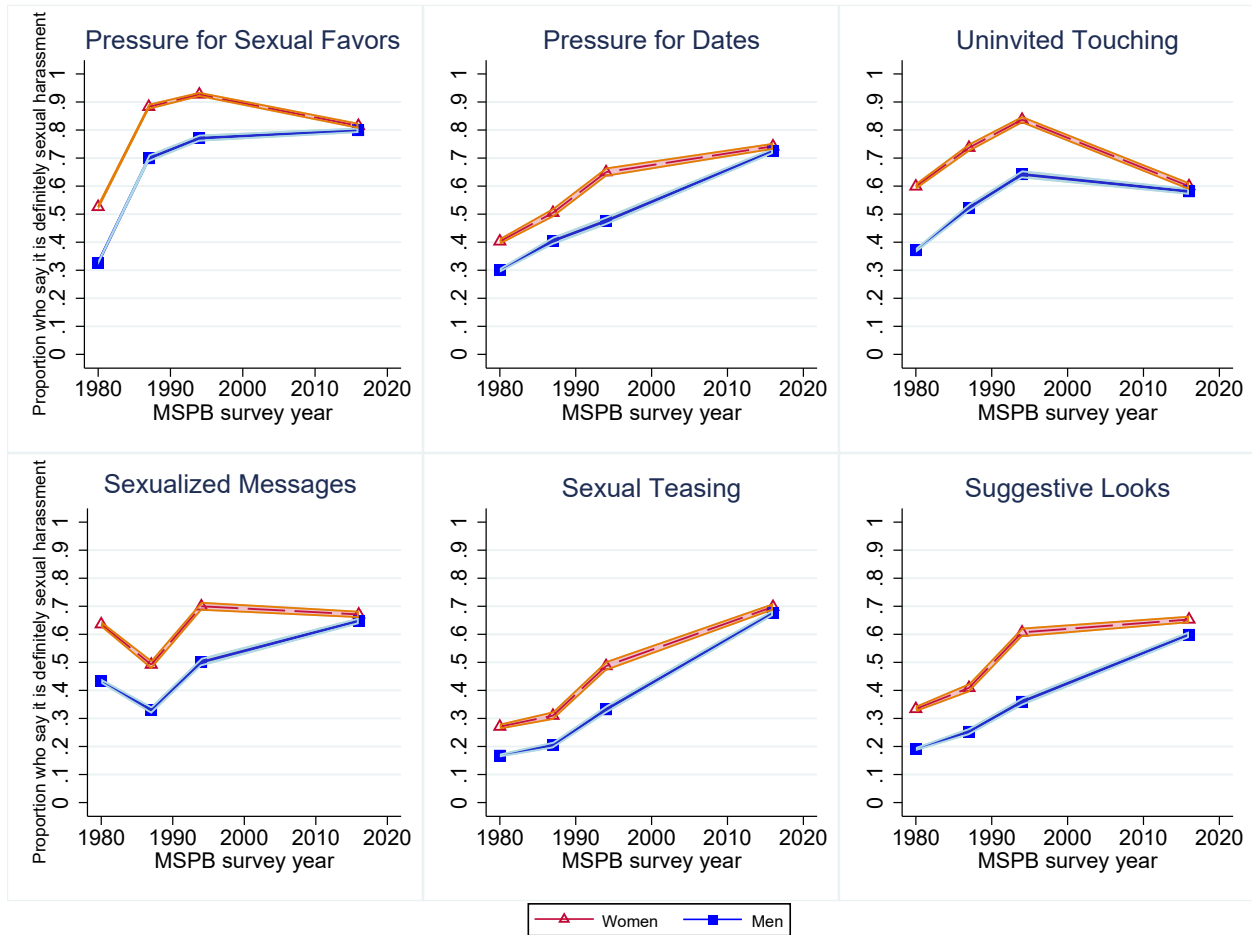


Figure 4: Declining gender gap in perceptions of which behaviors definitely constitute sexual harassment. Source: Weighted USMSPB data, with 95 percent Confidence Intervals. For 1980, 1987, and 1994, the imagined perpetrator is a coworker. For 2016, the imagined perpetrator is any person in the workplace.

in the intensity of one of the most important previous predictors of workplace sexual harassment: male preponderance in the workplace.¹¹

Decline of the Gender Gap in Attitudes toward Sexual Harassment

Figure 4 documents the change across USMSPB surveys in men’s and women’s attitudes toward each specific kind of sexual harassment that the surveys asked about.¹² Over time, there has been a profound increase in the percentage of men and women who believe that each specific act is “definitely” sexual harassment or that they “strongly agree” (for USMSPB 2016) the behavior constitutes sexual harassment. In 1980, 52.6 percent of women respondents believed that if another worker pressured them or someone else for sexual favors, they would definitely consider it to be sexual harassment. Of male respondents in 1980, 32.7 percent had the same view, about 20 percentage points lower than the women respondents. In 2016, when asked a similar question, the men and women had similar (though still

significantly different) answers: 79.9 percent of men and 81.5 percent of women strongly agreed that pressure for sexual favors was sexual harassment.¹³

The other five types of potentially harassing behavior charted in Figure 4 all follow a similar pattern. Figure 4 shows that potentially harassing behaviors have been increasingly understood as harassment by men and women alike over time. Additionally and importantly, the gender gap in perceptions of sexual harassment, which was substantial and mostly unchanged in the 1980–1994 period, had mostly disappeared by 2016 across all types of perceived behaviors. From the peak gender gaps in 1980–1994, the gender gaps in perceptions of sexual harassment behaviors were reduced by between 78 percent and 92 percent by 2016. The diminution of the gender gap in perceptions of sexual harassment behaviors is consistent with a diminution of the association between male predominance in the workplace and women’s experience of sexual harassment and could be indicative of a fundamental change in male workplace culture. The declining gender gap in Figure 4 is also consistent with reports of a declining gender gap in the perceived seriousness of sexual harassment of women from national opinion survey data (Holman and Kalmoe 2021). Figure 4 supports Corollary 3, which predicted that a broad decline in workplace sexual harassment would be accompanied by a reduction in the gender gap in attitudes toward sexual harassment.

Estimates of the Yearly National Incidence of Workplace Sexual Harassment of Women in 1987 and 2016

Table 3 reports estimates of the number of women and the percentage of women per year in the United States who were victims of workplace sexual harassment based on the 24-month incidence rates of different kinds of harassment reported by female employees of the U.S. federal government in the 1987 and 2016 USMSPB surveys.

Data from the 1987 USMSPB survey showed that 32.2 percent of women workers reported at least one of the following workplace harassment events in the 24 months prior to the survey in 1987: rape, attempted rape or assault, pressure for dates, deliberate unwanted touching, sexualized communications, and pressure for sexual favors.

Assuming that the probability of being harassed in year 1 is independent¹⁴ of the probability of being harassed in year 2, then the probability of *not* being harassed in a two-year time frame equals the square of the probability of *not* being harassed in a one-year time frame. Solving x in $(1 - x)^2 = 1 - y$, where y is the two-year sexual harassment rate and x is the one-year sexual harassment rate, yields $x = 1 - \sqrt{1 - y}$. This means that $y = 2x - x^2$ and implies that $x > (y/2)$.

A two-year harassment rate of 32.2 percent corresponds to a one-year sexual harassment rate of 17.7 percent for women who experienced at least one the five kinds of sexual harassment per year (including 0.4 percent per year experiencing rape, sexual assault, or attempted sexual assault; 4.4 percent experiencing pressure for sexual favors; 14.1 percent experiencing deliberate touching; 6.1 percent experiencing sexually suggestive communications; and 7.6 percent experiencing pressure for dates). I apply the 17.7 percent annual harassment rate reported by women

Table 3: Estimates of yearly number of women harassed at work in the United States by type of harassment

	Two Year Harassment Rate (%)	Imputed One Year Harassment Rate (%)	Number of Women Harassed Per Year, Millions	(95% CI)
1987, working women population: 43.2 million				
(1) Rape/assault	0.8	0.4	0.18	(0.12, 0.23)
(2) Pressure for sexual favors	8.7	4.4	1.9	(1.7, 2.3)
(3) Deliberate touching	26.1	14.1	6.1	(5.7, 6.4)
(4) Pressure for dates	14.7	7.6	3.3	(3.0, 3.5)
(5) Sexually suggestive communication	11.8	6.1	2.6	(2.4, 2.9)
Any of the above five categories (narrow definition of sexual harassment)	32.2	17.7	7.6	(7.3, 8.0)
(6) Suggestive looks	28.3	15.3	6.6	(6.3, 7.0)
(7) Sexually teasing remarks	34.8	19.2	8.3	(7.9, 8.7)
Wide definition of sexual harassment, any of seven categories	42.3	24.0	10.4	(10.0, 10.8)
2016, working women population: 64.7 million				
(1) Rape/assault	0.5	0.3	0.16	(0.098, 0.23)
(2) Pressure for sexual favors	1.4	0.7	0.44	(0.34, 0.55)
(3) Deliberate touching	12.3	6.3	4.1	(3.8, 4.4)
(4) Pressure for dates	2.5	1.3	0.82	(0.68, 0.96)
(5) Sexually suggestive communication	5.4	2.8	1.8	(1.6, 2.0)
Any of the above five categories (narrow definition of sexual harassment)	14.4	7.5	4.8	(4.5, 5.2)
(6) Suggestive looks	8.6	4.4	2.8	(2.6, 3.1)
(7) Sexually teasing remarks	9.4	4.8	3.1	(2.8, 3.4)
Wide definition of sexual harassment, any of seven categories	17.6	9.2	5.9	(5.6, 6.3)

Source: Weighted USMSPB data for women respondents reporting that each behavior occurred at least once in the past two years.

workers to the active adult female workforce of 43.2 million women in the United States in 1987 and arrive at approximately 7.6 million women experiencing sexual harassment at work in the United States in 1987 under a narrow definition of sexual harassment.

Without the luxury of nationally representative data for sexual harassment incidence of working women in the broad United States in specified time frames, I make the assumption that the rate of sexual harassment was similar in the federal workforce and the non-federal workforce. Workers who had worked in both federal and non-federal employment believed that the frequency of sexual harassment was similar in both environments (U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board 1988:2). The 1987 USMSPB survey suggested that workers who had worked in both environments were somewhat more likely to report that there was more sexual harassment in non-federal workplaces, so Table 3 likely underestimates the yearly incidence of sexual harassment in the United States.

In the 2016 USMSPB data, the imputed annual rate of the same harassment events was 7.5 percent of working women harassed at work per 12 months (under the narrow definition of harassment), compared with 17.7 percent of women workers harassed per 12 months in 1987. Although the extant literature on yearly incidence of workplace sexual harassment in the United States is sparse, these USMSPB estimates are consistent with prior results from at least one other non-federal data source, the Youth Development Study.¹⁵

Extrapolating from the data on federal employees, Table 3 shows estimates of 4.1 million women in the United States experiencing touching, crowding, or someone else leaning over them at work in 2016. In the same year, 1.8 million women in the United States were subjected to unwelcome communications of a sexual nature at work. Eight hundred and twenty thousand women were pressured for dates. Four hundred and forty thousand women were pressured for sexual favors at work. One hundred and sixty thousand women were raped or sexually assaulted at work in 2016.

Although the rate at which women experience sexual harassment at work has declined, the population of women workers in the United States was much larger in 2016 than in 1987, so the estimated number of women workers sexually harassed per year did not decline as much as the rate of sexual harassment declined. I estimate that 4.8 million women in the United States were sexually harassed at work in 2016 (under the narrow definition of harassment) compared with the 7.6 million women sexually harassed at work in 1987. The U.S. EEOC received 6,758 sexual harassment charges in fiscal year 2016 (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission 2022). My estimate of 4.8 million women sexually harassed at work (under the narrow definition of harassment) in 2016 implies that out of every 715 working women sexually harassed in the United States in 2016, only one filed a complaint with the EEOC ($4.8M/6758 = 715$). The low reporting rate is one reason why formal reports ought not be used as an estimate of the incidence rate of workplace sexual harassment events. Compared with the victims of other kinds of torts, the victims of workplace discrimination have always been hesitant to bring formal claims or to sue (Bumiller 1987).

Conclusions

The sharp and significant decline from 1987 to 2016 in the rate of reported workplace sexual harassment by women in the employment of the U.S. federal government has been broad, across all federal agencies surveyed, across all types of sexual harassment, and across all workplace gender compositions. The apparent decline in sexual harassment among federal workers is consistent with the reported declines in sexual harassment among medical interns (Frank et al. 2024) and the decline in EEOC claims of sexual harassment from 1997 to 2017 (Cassino and Besen-Cassino 2019). The sharp diminution in the 2016 USMSPB data of a once formidable association between male percentage in the workplace and sexual harassment of women, along with the sharp decline in the gender gap in attitudes about what behaviors constitute sexual harassment both suggest that something important about male workplace culture may have changed in a way that has reduced sexual harassment in the federal government.

The U.S. Merit System Protection Board lacked a quorum during the Trump administration so their report (U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board 2022b) on the 2016 data was delayed until late 2022. Their report shows the 2016 rate of sexual harassment events to be sharply lower than past values consistent with our analysis here. Given the enormous social and economic consequences of sexual harassment, a more than 50 percent drop in its incidence deserves more careful study.

It is certainly possible that the sharp post-1987 rise of anti-harassment training in workplaces for managers and workers (Dobbin and Kalev 2019) may have finally helped to suppress harassment consistent with Epp's (2009) theory of legalized accountability, despite longstanding skepticism about the effectiveness of such programs (Dobbin and Kalev 2020; Edelman 2016; Grossman 2003; Tinkler, Li and Mollborn 2007). The era of the relatively flat rate of sexual harassment reported between the 1980 and 1994 USMSPB surveys and before the 2016 USMSPB survey was the era in which Lauren Edelman created the theory of legal endogeneity (Edelman 2016; Edelman, Uggen and Erlanger 1999). The sharp reduction in workplace sexual harassment revealed in USMSPB 2016 is more consistent with Epp's (2009) theory of legalized accountability than Edelman's theory of legal endogeneity.

As potential explanations for the observed sharp drop in workplace sexual harassment, perhaps a newer generation of male workers has been more appropriately cautious in their approaches to women coworkers; this would be the explanation of demographic metabolism (Ryder 1965). The growth of the female workforce and the steady decline in workplace gender segregation (Baunach 2002) has meant that women are now less likely to be in the kind of isolating male-dominated workplaces where women have historically been more vulnerable to harassment, though the analysis here shows that gender balance at the workplace is a weaker predictor than it used to be of sexual harassment incidence.

The rapid rise of the #MeToo movement (Hirshman 2019), created by Black feminist Tarana Burke in 2006 to organize women against sexual violence, may have also played a role in making workplace sexual harassment less common. In 2018, The New York Times reported on 201 powerful men who had lost their jobs

as a result of the #MeToo movement (Carlsen et al. 2018). Public accountability and sanctions for past bad behavior have the potential to shift an organizational climate to make future bad behavior less likely (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2018).

Limitations

One limitation to the external validity of this research is that the USMSPB surveys were fielded only to federal workers. The 1987 USMSP survey showed that women federal workers who had also worked outside of the government believed that the climate of sexual harassment was similar in both contexts: 65 percent reported that the harassment was the same in both contexts, 23 percent reported that there was more sexual harassment outside of federal employment, and 12 percent reported that there was more harassment in federal employment. In the 1994 USMSPB survey, the question was repeated and the number of women who reported that the sexual harassment environment was worse outside of federal employment increased to 28 percent, whereas reports of no difference declined to 60 percent. The difference in perceptions of the relative prevalence of sexual harassment within the federal workforce and outside of the federal workforce between 1987 and 1994 is statistically significant. Unfortunately, the same question was not repeated in the 2016 and 2021 USMSPB surveys.

It is very likely (as shown by the USMSPB data from 1987 and 1994) that workplace sexual harassment has been higher in non-federal than in federal employment. Without national data comparable to the USMSPB data, we cannot know *how much* higher the rate of sexual harassment is in non-federal employment. Some of the most onerous kinds of low-paying work occur in non-federal employment in places such as hotels, factory floors, and retail sales where sexual harassment is suspected to be rampant (Frye 2017) and where there is no direct analog in federal employment.

Although the USMSPB surveys are the most consistent set of data we have covering workplace sexual harassment incidence in the United States in the 1980–2021 period, the USMSPB surveys changed survey mode. The sharp drop in reported sexual harassment incidence apparent in Figure 1 and Table 1 coincided with a switch from mail surveys to web surveys in 2016, with correspondingly lower survey response rates. It is not obvious why survey mode should matter. The low response rates in high-quality representative web surveys have generally been shown to be nonproblematic in other situations (Chang and Krosnick 2009; Huggins and Krotki 2001)¹⁶ but bias from the differences in USMSPB survey modes, survey administration, and declining response rates cannot be ruled out.

In addition, there were wording and framing differences across the surveys that could have affected the results. “Unwanted pressure for dates” in 1980, 1987, and 1994 was changed to simply “pressure for dates” in 2016 and 2021 (making the sharp decline all the more surprising). The 2016 survey had the words “sexual harassment” on top of the page with the questions about the subjects’ personal experiences with harassing behaviors, whereas all the other survey waves lacked this heading, which could have led to lower reporting of sexual harassment behaviors in the 2016 survey

(Ilies et al. 2003). Respondents reported even lower rates of being sexually harassed in 2021 compared with 2016, and the questions were specific and experiential and reasonably consistent across survey waves so that it is not clear how differences in framing on the page could matter.

There are other reasons to believe that the observed decline in reported sexual harassment in the USMSPB data was real rather than artifactual. The sharp attenuation over time in USMSPB data of the gender gap in attitudes about what constitutes sexual harassment and the decline in the association between male predominance at work and the rate of sexual harassment of women both are consistent with a true decline in sexual harassment in federal workplaces. Nonetheless, some unknown effect of bias from variation in wording and framing differences across USMSPB surveys also cannot be ruled out.

Discussion

Edelman (1992) showed that U.S. federal government organizations (being organizationally proximate to the U.S. EEOC where rules and enforcement around workplace discrimination originated) tended to open anti-discrimination offices in the 1970s, earlier than most other organizations. Unlike most other employers in the United States, the federal government has been monitoring the level of sexual harassment among its workers since 1980 (albeit irregularly). Monitoring the relevant outcome demonstrates a more tightly coupled bond between the policy and practice (Bromley and Powell 2012) of anti-harassment programs in the federal government than existed in most other U.S. employers.

USMSPB data show that the rate at which women federal workers were sexually harassed did not begin to decline until after 1994. If federal policies in the 1970s and 1980s contributed to a decline in the rate of sexual harassment, they contributed slowly. A USMSPB report from 1988 suggested that there was no association between agencies own estimations of their anti-harassment training efforts and the rate of sexual harassment at federal agencies. USMSPB's recommended better, more specifically tailored trainings (U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board 1988:49)

Between the 1970s and the 2000, there was a sharp rise in the adoption of sexual harassment trainings for managers and workers across the U.S. workforce (Dobbin and Kalev 2019). Among male federal employees in the 1994 USMSPB survey, 82.9 percent reported that they had *ever* had training about sexual harassment during their federal employment. In the 2021 USMSPB survey, 89.7 percent of male respondents reported having received training about sexual harassment in the *prior two years*. The No FEAR Act of 2002 mandated regular anti-discrimination training for federal employees, but the quality and commitment to training has varied across agencies (U.S. Government Accountability Office 2024).

It is beyond the scope of this article to choose between competing explanations for the apparent decline in the rate of workplace sexual harassment among federal workers in the United States; more research is needed with USMSPB data and whatever other nationally representative surveys may become available. Whether anti-harassment trainings (in frequency and quality), organizational adoption of strict anti-harassment policies (and the dissemination of those policies), demographic

metabolism, social movement activism, the public punishment of the worst offenders, or changing social mores are most responsible for driving down the incidence of workplace sexual harassment, two findings are clear.

First, some combination of factors seems to have worked powerfully over the course of the past three decades to reduce the incidence of workplace sexual harassment of women who work for the U.S. federal government. The combination of potential factors and the long-time frame of the observed changes may explain why experimental tests of anti-harassment trainings have yielded insufficient evidence of positive change (Tinkler et al. 2007). Multiple trainings over the course of many years, reinforcement from friends and coworkers, news about court cases, perpetrators facing consequences, changing social attitudes, the passage of time, the impact of social movements such as #MeToo, and demographic metabolism can combine over decades to achieve substantial changes incrementally that are difficult to identify in a shorter-term experimental setting.

Second, despite a surprisingly sharp decline in the incidence of workplace harassment of women in the United States, an extension of USMSPB data to the full U.S. female workforce yields a rough estimate of between 4.8 million and 5.9 million American women were harassed at work in 2016 (depending on how one defines sexual harassment). The extrapolation of USMSPB harassment estimates to the whole national workforce yield an underestimate and potentially a substantial underestimate of sexual harassment for the entire workforce in 2016 given the divergence between federal and non-federal environments between 1987 and 1994.

Workplace sexual harassment has profoundly negative long-term health and occupational impacts (McLaughlin et al. 2017; Willness, Steel and Lee 2007). I join other scholars (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2018) in arguing that much more progress is needed in the long-term battle against workplace sexual harassment. Understanding precisely which policies or broader societal trends have already contributed to the apparently remarkable decline in sexual harassment incidence among federal workers (and how, and why) would be a great place to start.

Cases

Brown v. Board of Education, 347 U.S. 483 (1954). U.S. Supreme Court.

Meritor Savings Bank v. Vinson et al., 477 U.S. 57 (1986). U.S. Supreme Court.

Burlington Industries, Inc. v. Ellerth, 524 U.S. 742 (1998). U.S. Supreme Court.

Faragher v. City of Boca Raton, 524 U.S. 775 (1998). U.S. Supreme Court.

Obergefell v. Hodges, 576 U.S. 644 (2015). U.S. Supreme Court.

Notes

- 1 See the widely used and influential Sexual Experiences Questionnaire, which in most forms lacks a specific time frame in the questions (Fitzgerald, Gelfand and Drasgow 1995; see EMERGE 2023 for SEQ question wording; and see also Gutek, Murphy and Douma 2004 for a critique of the SEQ). For instance, from the SEQ: "Have you ever been in a

situation where a supervisor or a coworker attempted to stroke or fondle you?" The SEQ questions have sometimes been modified to have a specific time frame; for instance, the one-year time frame used in the Department of Defense Sexual Harassment Survey (Hay and Elig 1999), a one-year time frame used in a national phone survey from 2003 to 2004 (Rospenda, Richman and Shannon 2009), and a two-year time frame used in a survey of three organizations (Magley et al. 1999). For one example of questions with indefinite time frame, see the Pew surveys that ask the question, "Have you *ever* personally received unwanted sexual advances or verbal or physical harassment of a sexual nature?" (Pew Research Center 2018, italics added). For another example of a question with an indefinite time frame, see the GSS question "sexhar" fielded in 1994 and 1996: "Sometimes at work people find themselves the object of sexual advances, propositions, or unwanted sexual discussions from co-workers or supervisors. The advances sometimes involve physical contact and sometimes just involve sexual conversations. Has this *ever* happened to you?" (italics added).

- 2 See 45 Fed Reg 74676 codified as CFR Chapter XIV §1604.11.
- 3 Hirshman (2019) argued that the Supreme Court's *Meritor v. Vinson* decision, while ostensibly a victory for Vinson, MacKinnon, and women's rights, did not go far enough in making companies culpable for sexual harassment on their premises. By opening the door to the kind of affirmative defenses that Edelman (2016) describes as symbolic, Hirshman argues that *Meritor* and later Court decision were in fact losses for women's rights.
- 4 In explaining the social movement utility of incrementalism, Eskridge (2002) noted the choice that marriage equality activists had to make in Vermont in 1999, accepting a civil union compromise instead of full marriage equality. Civil unions offered Vermont same-sex couples the equivalent state benefits but none of the federal benefits, none of the interstate transportability, and none of the social recognition of marriage. Civil unions were an incremental step toward marriage equality that gave straight Vermonters a chance to see same-sex couples as wanting and deserving to marry. Ten years later, in 2009, the Vermont legislature became the first U.S. state legislature to make their state a marriage equality state without having been forced to do so by the courts. According to the theory of incrementalism, progress comes from small gains and compromises that accrue and snowball over time.
- 5 There is also a form of the contact hypothesis at work in male-dominated work spaces. In work situations where men are numerically predominant, women interact with male coworkers more and that might increase the incidence of sexual harassment per woman worker even in a male culture in which the harassment of women is frowned upon.
- 6 "Laws that are ambiguous, procedural in emphasis, and difficult to enforce [such as anti-discrimination law] invite symbolic responses- responses designed to create a visible commitment to law which may, but do not necessarily, reduce employment discrimination" (see Edelman 1992, p.1542).
- 7 See also Justice Rehnquist's majority decision in *Meritor* (1986, p.67), "For sexual harassment to be actionable, it must be sufficiently severe or pervasive..."
- 8 It could be argued that that the prefix of "unwanted" is redundant, as "pressure for dates" or "pressure for sexual favors" imply unwantedness.
- 9 In 1987, the question wording was "The people I normally work with are" and the five categories closed-ended options were "all men; more men; equal numbers; more women; all women." Only 3.9% of female respondents reported working at "all men" workplaces and only 2.3% reported working at "all women" workplaces. The 2016 USMSPB question about workplace gender balance offered five closed-ended options but the extreme

categories were more broadly defined compared with the 1987 categories: “substantially more males than females; slightly more males than females; about the same number of males and females; slightly more females than males; substantially more females than males.” To make the 1987 and 2016 categories more comparable, I reduced categories to three, so “all men” and “more men” would be combined into “more men” (for 1987) and “substantially more males” and “slightly more males” were combined into “more men” for 2016 (and the same was done for workplaces that were predominantly women).

- 10 From Table 2, the combined SE of the difference between slopes in the independent samples in M1 and M3 is $((0.0388^2) + (0.0249^2))^{0.5} = 0.0461$. The Z-statistic is $(-0.312 + 0.0825)/0.0461 = -4.98$, highly significant.
- 11 Another potential way of studying the relationship between gender balance at work and women’s experience of sexual harassment is to examine the gender balance in each agency as a predictor of workplace sexual harassment. However, the federal agencies had workplaces of widely varying gender balance so the agencies’ overall gender balance did not predict individual sexual harassment in USMSPB data in 1987 or 2016 (but see also McLaughlin, Uggen and Blackstone [2012] for an analysis of industry sex ratio predicting sexual harassment).
- 12 USMSPB surveys did not ask subjects if they thought rape or sexual assault counted as sexual harassment.
- 13 Of the six categories of behavior charted in Figure 4, five still had statistically significant gender gaps in 2016, but the gender gaps in 2016 were relatively small and are difficult to discern visually at the scale of Figure 4. The one kind of potentially harassing behavior with a non-significant gender gap in perception in 2016 was pressure for dates.
- 14 Independence between year 1 and year 2 is a necessary simplifying assumption for this calculation, but it is an unrealistic assumption (see McLaughlin et al. 2012, p.633).
- 15 McLaughlin, Uggen, and Blackstone (2017), using the Youth Development Study (YDS) surveys of women subjects from St. Paul, Minnesota, found that at age approximately 29 in 2003, 11% of the women experienced some combination of unwanted touching at work and/or at least four or more of offensive jokes, offensive gossip, staring or invasion of personal space, staring or leering, pictures, posters or other offensive material, a collective definition they refer to as “severe sexual harassment.” Although the YDS and USMSPB asked questions about different sexually harassing behaviors, McLaughlin et al.’s estimate of 11% of women harassed per year at work is comfortably between my USMSPB (narrow definition) estimate of 17.7% of women sexually harassed at work annually in 1987 and 7.5% of women sexually harassed at work per year in 2016 (see Table 3). A linear interpolation between USMSPB-based one-year estimates of 17.7% in 1987 and 7.5% in 2016 for the U.S. female workforce yields a 12.1% workplace sexual harassment rate in 2003, similar to McLaughlin et al.’s estimate of 11% in 2003 from the YDS data.
- 16 Steadily declining response rates to Random Digit Dial telephone polls seem not to have increased bias much at all (Keeter et al. 2000, 2017).

References

- Arvey, Richard D., and Marcie A. Cavanaugh. 1995. “Using Surveys to Assess the Prevalence of Sexual Harassment: Some Methodological Problems.” *Journal of Social Issues* 51(1):39–52. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.1995.tb01307.x>

- Backhouse, Constance, and Leah Cohen. 1978. *The Secret Oppression: Sexual Harassment of Working Women*. Toronto: Macmillan.
- Baker, Carrie N. 2008. *The Women's Movement against Sexual Harassment*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1086/599269>
- Ball, Carlos A. 2014. *Same-Sex Marriage and Children: A Tale of History, Social Science, and Law*. New York: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199977871.001.0001>
- Ball, Carlos A. 2019. *The Queering of Corporate America: How Big Business went from LGBTQ Adversary to Ally*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Baunach, Dawn Michelle. 2002. "Trends in Occupational Sex Segregation and Inequality, 1950 to 1990." *Social Science Research* 31:77–98. <https://doi.org/10.1006/ssre.2001.0719>
- Berebitsky, Julie. 2012. *Sex and the Office: A History of Gender, Power and Desire*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Bromley, Patricia and Walter W. Powell. 2012. "From Smoke and Mirrors to Walking the Talk: Decoupling in the Contemporary World." *The Academy of Management Annals* 6(1):483–530. <https://doi.org/10.5465/19416520.2012.684462>
- Brown, Helen Gurley. [1964]2004. *Sex and the Office*. Fort Lee, NJ: Barricade Books.
- Bumiller, Kristin. 1987. "Victims in the Shadow of the Law: A Critique of the Model of Legal Protection." *Signs* 12(3):421–439. <https://doi.org/10.1086/494337>
- Carlsen, Audrey, Maya Salam, Claire Cain Miller, Denise Lu, Ash Ngu, Jugal K. Patel, and Zach Wichter. 2018. "#MeToo Brought Down 201 Powerful Men. Nearly Half of their Replacements Are Women." *The New York Times*, October 23, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/10/23/us/metoo-replacements.html>
- Cassino, Dan, and Yasemin Besen-Cassino. 2019. "Race, Thread and Workplace Sexual Harassment: The Dynamics of Harassment in the United States, 1997-2016." *Gender, Work & Organization* 26:1221–1240. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12394>
- Cathcart, Kevin M. and Leslie J. Gabel-Brett, eds. 2016. *Love Unites Us: Winning the Freedom to Marry in America*. New York: New Press.
- Chang, Linchiat and Jon A. Krosnick. 2009. "National Surveys via RDD Telephone Interviewing versus the Internet: Comparing Sample Representativeness and Response Quality." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 73(4):641–78. <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfp075>
- D'Emilio, John. 1998. *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States 1940-1970*. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- De Coster, Stacy, Sarah Beth Estes, and Charles W. Mueller. 1999. "Routine Activities and Sexual Harassment in the Workplace." *Work and Occupations* 26(1):21–49. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0730888499026001003>
- Dobbin, Frank and Alexandra Kalev. 2019. "The Promise and Peril of Sexual Harassment Programs." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 116(25):12255–60. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1818477116>
- Dobbin, Frank, and Alexandra Kalev. 2020. "Why Sexual Harassment Programs Backfire, and What to Do About it." *Harvard Business Review* (May-June):45–52.
- Edelman, Lauren B. 1992. "Legal Ambiguity and Symbolic Structures: Organizational Mediation of Civil Rights Law." *American Journal of Sociology* 97(6):1531–576. <https://doi.org/10.1086/229939>
- Edelman, Lauren B. 2016. *Working Law: Courts, Corporations and Symbolic Civil Rights*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226400938.001.0001>

- Edelman, Lauren B., Christopher Uggen, and Howard S. Erlanger. 1999. "The Endogeneity of Legal Regulation: Grievance Procedures as Rational Myth." *American Journal of Sociology* 105(2):406–54. <https://doi.org/10.1086/210316>
- EMERGE. 2023. "Sexual Experiences Questionnaire-Workplace." https://emerge.ucsd.edu/r_2aqwf6qmm0664uq/. Accessed April 27
- Epp, Charles R. 2009. *Making Rights Real: Activists, Bureaucrats, and the Creation of the Legalistic State*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226211664.001.0001>
- Eskridge, William N., Jr. 2002. *Equality Practice: Civil Unions and the Future of Gay Rights*. New York: Routledge.
- Eskridge, William N., Jr. 2008. *Dishonorable Passions: Sodomy Laws in America, 1861-2003*. New York: Viking.
- Espeland, Wendy Nelson. 1998. *The Struggle for Water: Politics, Rationality, and Identity in the American Southwest*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Feldblum, Chai R., and Victoria A. Lipnic. 2016. "Select Task Force on the Study of Harassment in the Workplace." U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Accessed March 23, 2023 (https://www.eeoc.gov/select-task-force-study-harassment-workplace#_Toc453686298).
- Fitzgerald, Louise F. 1993. "Sexual Harassment: Violence against Women in the Workplace." *American Psychologist* 48(10):1070–76. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.48.10.1070>
- Fitzgerald, Louise F., Michele J. Gelfand, and Fritz Drasgow. 1995. "Measuring Sexual Harassment: Theoretical and Psychometric Advances." *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 17(4):425–45. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15324834baspp1704_2
- Frank, Elana, Zhuo Zhao, Yu Fang, Jennifer L. Cleary, Elizabeth M. Viglianti, Srijan Sen, and Constance Guille. 2024. "Trends in Sexual Harassment Prevalence and Recognition during Intern Year." *JAMA Health Forum* 5(3):e240139–4. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamahealthforum.2024.0139>
- Frye, Jocelyn. 2017. "Not just the Rich and Famous: The Pervasiveness of Sexual Harassment Across Industries Affects All Workers." Accessed August 28, 2024 (<https://www.americanprogress.org/article/not-just-rich-famous/>).
- Gamson, William. 1990. *The Strategy of Social Protest*. 2nd ed. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- Grossman, Joanna L. 2003. "The Culture of Compliance: the Final Triumph of Form over Substance in Sexual Harassment Law." *Harvard Women's Law Journal* 26:3–76.
- Gruber, James E. and Lars Bjorn. 1980. "Blue-Collar Blues: The Sexual Harassment of Women Autoworkers." *Work and Occupations* 9(3):271–98. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0730888482009003002>
- Gutek, Barbara A., Aaron Groff Cohen, and Alisom M. Konrad. 1990. "Predicting Social-Sexual Behavior at Work: A Contact Hypothesis." *Academy of Management Journal* 33(3):560–77. <https://doi.org/10.2307/256581>
- Gutek, Barbara A., Ryan O. Murphy, and Bambi Douma. 2004. "A Review and Critique of the Sexual Experiences Questionnaire." *Law and Human Behavior* 28(4):457–82. <https://doi.org/10.1023/B:LAHU.0000039335.96042.26>
- Hay, Mary Sue, and Timothy W. Elig. 1999. "The 1995 Department of Defense Sexual Harassment Survey: Overview and Methodology." *Military Psychology* 11(3):233–42. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327876mp1103_2

- Hirshman, Linda. 2019. *Reckoning: The Epic Battle Against Sexual Abuse and Harassment*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Holman, Mirya R. and Nathan P. Kalmoe. 2021. "The Polls-Trends: Sexual Harassment." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 85(2):706–718. <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfab034>
- Huggins, Vicki J. and Karol Krotki. 2001. "Implementation of Nationally Representative Web-Based Surveys." in *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the American Statistical Association*.
- Ilies, Remus, Nancy Hauserman, Susan Schwochau, and John Stibal. 2003. "Reported Incidence Rates of Work-Related Sexual Harassment in the United States: Using Meta-Analysis to Explain Reported Rate Disparities." *Personnel Psychology* 56:607–31. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-6570.2003.tb00752.x>
- Jackson, Robert A., and Meredith A. Newman. 2004. "Sexual Harassment in the Federal Workplace Revisited: Influences on Sexual Harassment by Gender." *Public Administration Review* 64(6):705–17. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6210.2004.00417.x>
- Keeter, Scott, Nick Hatley, Courtney Kennedy, and Arnold Lau. 2017. "What Low Response Rates Mean for Telephone Surveys." Pew Research Center. Accessed August 19, 2019 (<http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/12/2017/05/12154630/RDD-Non-response-Full-Report.pdf>).
- Keeter, Scott, Carolyn Miller, Andrew Kohut, Robert M. Groves, and Stanley Presser. 2000. "Consequences of Reducing Nonresponse in a National Telephone Survey." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 64(2):125–48. <https://doi.org/10.1086/317759>
- Kelly, Erin, and Frank Dobbin. 1998. "How Affirmative Action Became Diversity Management: Employer Response to Antidiscrimination Law, 1961 to 1996." *American Behavioral Scientist* 41(7):960–84. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764298041007008>
- MacKinnon, Catharine A. 1979. *The Sexual Harassment of Working Women*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Maestas, Nicole, Kathleen J. Mullen, David Powell, Till von Wachter, and Jeffrey B. Wenger. 2017. *The American Working Conditions Survey Data: Codebook and Data Description*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. Accessed June 5, 2023 (<https://www.rand.org/pubs/tools/TL269.html>).
- Magley, Vicki J., Charles L. Hulin, Louise F. Fitzgerald, and Mary De Nardo. 1999. "Outcomes of Self-Labeling Sexual Harassment." *Journal of Applied Psychology* 84 (3):390–402. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.84.3.390>
- Marshall, Anna-Maria. 2005. "Idle Rights: Employees' Rights Consciousness and the Construction of Sexual Harassment Policies." *Law & Society Review* 39(1):83–121. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0023-9216.2005.00078.x>
- McLaughlin, Heather, Christopher Uggen, and Amy Blackstone. 2012. "Sexual Harassment, Workplace Authority, and the Paradox of Power." *American Sociological Review* 77(4):625–47. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122412451728>
- McLaughlin, Heather, Christopher Uggen, and Amy Blackstone. 2017. "The Economic and Career Effects of Sexual Harassment on Working Women." *Gender & Society* 31(3):333–58. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243217704631>
- Meyer, John W., and Brian Rowan. 1977. "Institutionalized Organizations: Formal Structure as Myth and Ceremony." *American Journal of Sociology* 83(2):340–63. <https://doi.org/10.1086/226550>
- National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2018. *Sexual Harassment of Women: Climate, Culture, and Consequences in Academic Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine*. Washington, D.C.: The National Academies Press.

- Orfield, Gary, Susan E. Eaton, and Harvard Project on School Desegregation. 1996. *Dismantling Desegregation: The Quiet Reversal of Brown v. Board of Education*. New York: The New Press.
- Pew Research Center. 2018. "Sexual Harassment at Work in the Era of #MeToo." Accessed May 31, 2023 (pewresearch.org).
- Rosenberg, Gerald N. 2008. *The Hollow Hope: Can Courts Bring About Social Change?* 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226726687.001.0001>
- Rosenfeld, Michael J. 2021. *The Rainbow after the Storm: Marriage Equality and Social Change in the U.S.* New York: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197600436.001.0001>
- Rosenfeld, Michael J. 2024. "The Surprising Decline of Workplace Sexual Harassment Incidence in the US Federal Workforce, a replication package using data from the US Merit Systems Protection Board surveys." ICPSR. <https://doi.org/10.3886/E209051V1>
- Rospenda, Kathleen M., Judith A. Richman, and Candice A. Shannon. 2009. "Prevalence and Mental Health Correlates of Harassment and Discrimination in the Workplace." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 24(5):819–43. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260508317182>
- Ruggles, Steven, Sarah Flood, Matthew Sobek, Danika Brockman, Grace Cooper, Stephanie Richards, and Megan Schouweiler. 2023. "IPUMS USA: Version 13.0 [dataset]." Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS. <https://doi.org/10.18128/D010.V13.0>
- Ryder, Norman B. 1965. "The Cohort in the Study of Social Change." *American Sociological Review* 30:843–61. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2090964>
- Tinkler, Justine E. 2008. "'People are Too Quick to Take Offense': The Effects of Legal Information and Beliefs on Definitions of Sexual Harassment." *Law & Social Inquiry* 33(2):417–45. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-4469.2008.00108.x>
- Tinkler, Justine E. and Jun Zhao. 2020. "The Sexual Harassment of Federal Employees: Gender, Leadership Status, and Organizational Tolerance for Abuses of Power." *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 30(3):349–64. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/muz037>
- Tinkler, Justine Eatenson, Yan E. Li, and Stefanie Mollborn. 2007. "Can Legal Interventions Change Beliefs? The Effect of Exposure to Sexual Harassment Policy on Men's Gender Beliefs." *Social Psychology Quarterly* 70(4):480–94. <https://doi.org/10.1177/019027250707000413>
- U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. 2022. "Sexual Harassment in Our Nation's Workplaces." Washington, D.C. Accessed March 23, 2023 (<https://www.eeoc.gov/data/sexual-harassment-our-nations-workplaces>).
- U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. 2024. "Sexual Harassment." Accessed March 29, 2024 (<https://www.eeoc.gov/sexual-harassment>).
- U.S. Government Accountability Office. 2024. "Sexual Harassment: Actions Needed to Improve Prevention Training for Federal Civilian Employees." Washington, D.C.
- U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board. 1981. "Sexual Harassment in the Federal Workplace: Is it a Problem?" Washington, D.C.
- U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board. 1988. *Sexual Harassment in the Federal Government: an Update*. Washington, D.C.
- U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board. 1997. "Sexual Harassment in the Federal Workplace: 1978-1980, 1987, and 1994." 6893. ICPSR. Version 1. <https://doi.org/10.3886/ICPSR06893.v1>

- U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board. 2022a. "Merit Principles Survey Data." U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board. Accessed April 27, 2023 (<https://www.mspb.gov/foia/SurveyData.htm>).
- U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board. 2022b. "Sexual Harassment in Federal Workplaces: Understanding and Addressing the Problem." Washington, D.C. Accessed May 1, 2023 (https://www.mspb.gov/studies/studies/Sexual_Harassment_in_Federal_Workplaces_Understanding_and_Addressing_the_Problem_1987037.pdf).
- Willness, Chelsea R., Piers Steel, and Kibeom Lee. 2007. "A Meta-Analysis of the Antecedents and Consequences of Workplace Sexual Harassment." *Personnel Psychology* 60:127–62. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-6570.2007.00067.x>

Acknowledgments: The idea of this article started from discussions with research assistant Camilla Camargo about a research project comparing the history of coworker dating with workplace sexual harassment. Research assistant Jasleen Gosal excavated some obscure aspects of the history of federal government agencies training programs with respect to sexual harassment. Thanks to the staff at the Merit Systems Protection Board who answered many questions about surveys and data. The following people gave feedback on earlier drafts of the article: Hannah Tessler, Alisa Feldman, Michaela Simmons, Amy Hontalas, Kimberly Higuera, Justine Tinkler, and the Stanford Graduate Family Workshop. A previous version of these results was presented at the Population Association of America Conference in 2024.

Funding: None.

Michael J. Rosenfeld: Stanford University. E-mail: mrosenfe@stanford.edu.