

Women's eNews

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Study: Both Sexes on Campus Are Harassed

By Allison Stevens, WeNews correspondent

WASHINGTON, D.C. (WOMENSENEWS) – In the familiar storyline about sexual harassment, men are typically cast as the aggressors and women as the victims.

But a new report shatters that stereotype.

College men are equally as likely as their female peers to experience sexual harassment, according to a national survey of more than 2,000 college students conducted in May 2005 and released Tuesday by the American Association of University Women, an advocacy organization in Washington, D.C.

The study showed that nearly two-thirds of the respondents – 61 percent of men and 62 percent of women – reported experiencing some form of sexual harassment, defined in the study as unwanted and unwelcome sexual behavior that interferes with student life.

Respondents were between 18 and 24 years old and were enrolled in two and four-year programs at private and public colleges and universities around the country.

Analysts found the numbers surprisingly high, especially given the increase in public awareness of the subject in the aftermath of allegations against high-profile personalities such as President Bill Clinton, Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas and former Sen. Bob Packwood, a Republican from Oregon. Still, sexual harassment pervades college campuses, with jokes and comments part of daily life and physical harassment – such as groping, shadowing or forced sexual activity – fairly common, the report showed.

Men are the majority – 51 percent – of harassers. But nearly one-third of female respondents – or 31 percent – also admitted to committing sexual harassment, especially making jokes, offensive comments or gestures. Most said they harassed others because they thought it was funny, even though many targets did not, the report said.

The findings break down stereotypes about men and women at a time when societal expectations for both are changing, said Elena Silva, director of research at the AAUW Educational Foundation and a co-author of the study.

Anthony Rodriguez, founder and clinical director of The Men's Center, an organization in Davenport, Iowa, that treats male victims of sexual trauma, agreed. "Women aren't as passive as one would think and males can be victimized," he said in a telephone interview.

Culture Shift Creates Uncertainty

That a considerable number of female students admit to harassing other students reflects a cultural shift that has left women uncertain about their roles in society, Silva said. As women have entered the work force, they have been encouraged to become more assertive, she said. It is a new social pressure that is reflected in their more aggressive approach toward social relationships and sexual behavior.

At the same time, women are still encouraged to exhibit traditional “feminine” characteristics, resulting in confusion about their gender roles, Silva said.

“We’re talking about nearly a third of female college students saying they’ve sexually harassed somebody,” Silva said. “This is indicative of this larger struggle about how they should behave, how they should assert themselves.”

Men, on the other hand, have not traditionally been perceived as victims of sexual harassment because it is assumed that they welcome all sexual remarks and physical advances, a reflection of a cultural attitude that equates masculinity with intense interest in sexual activity.

“But not all men think it’s fabulous for a woman to come up and pinch him, grab him and make sexual remarks or text message pictures of herself,” Silva said. “It seems as though we want to believe that men want that and yet many men don’t want that.”

Men bear the particular brunt of jokes and insults about their sexual orientation, the study showed. Thirty-seven percent of male students said they had been slurred for seeming or being homosexual, compared with 13 percent of female students.

Men were also more likely to receive unwanted sexual images and messages, have sexual messages about them posted electronically, be asked for sexual favors and be spied on as they dressed or showered at school.

Physical Harassment More Likely for Women

Women, on the other hand, were more likely to experience sexual harassment that involves physical contact, such as being touched, grabbed or pinched, or have someone brush up against them in a sexual way. Thirty-five percent of women reported physical harassment, compared with 29 percent of men.

Female students were also more likely to receive sexual comments, jokes, gestures or looks, or be blocked, cornered or followed in a sexual way.

Men and women were nearly equally likely to be flashed or mooned, have sexual rumors spread about them, have their clothing pulled in a sexual way, be forced to kiss someone or forced into other sexual activity, or have their clothing pulled off or down.

Although men and women said they experienced harassment in similar numbers, the harassment takes a particularly heavy toll on women, the report showed.

A solid majority of female students who said they were harassed – 68 percent – said they were upset by the behavior, whereas only 35 percent of the males expressed similar feelings. Women were also more likely to report negative emotional reactions and changing their behavior to avoid harassment, the report finds.

Female students were more likely to feel embarrassed, angry, less confident, afraid, confused or disappointed with their college experience after experiencing sexual harassment. They also said they were more likely to avoid the perpetrator or certain places on campus and have difficulty sleeping or concentrating. They were also more likely to get someone to protect them, change their group of friends, lose their appetite, refrain from class participation, drop a class or skip an activity.

“Female students are particularly troubled by sexual harassment,” AAUW Educational Foundation President Barbara O’Connor said at a Tuesday press conference. “They are upset, embarrassed, angered and scared by these experiences, although it is rare that they actually report harassment to a college official.”

Men Unable to Articulate Feelings

Rodriguez questioned the validity of that finding, noting that many men do not possess the “emotional capital” to articulate feelings about sexual harassment or abuse.

Women “are able to say, ‘This is how I feel, and this sucks,’” Rodriguez said. “Men aren’t able to do that, so we compensate with more socially acceptable behaviors” such as aggression, isolation or diving into work. “If we’re talking college boys, they’ll say, ‘I’m going to play X-Box or whatever,’ and zone out there.”

The report showed that women were far more likely to tell someone about being harassed than were men. Neither men nor women, however, were likely to tell someone about the incident outside their circle of friends and family. Only 9 percent of women and 4 percent of men said they told a school employee about their experience.

The association is launching an effort to curb sexual harassment on campuses. It is conducting projects at 11 universities across the country that will assess policies and procedures, foster campus dialogue on the subject, raise awareness of the issue through campus media and publicity campaigns, examine student experiences via surveys and studies, and experiment with Web-based tools for learning about and reporting incidents of sexual harassment.

Allison Stevens is Washington bureau chief at Women’s eNews.

For more information:

The American Association of University Women - Drawing the Line: Sexual Harassment on Campus:

http://www.aauw.org/newsroom/presskits/DTL_Press_Conf_060124/DTL_012406.cfm

The Men's Center: <http://www.themenscenter.net/>

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